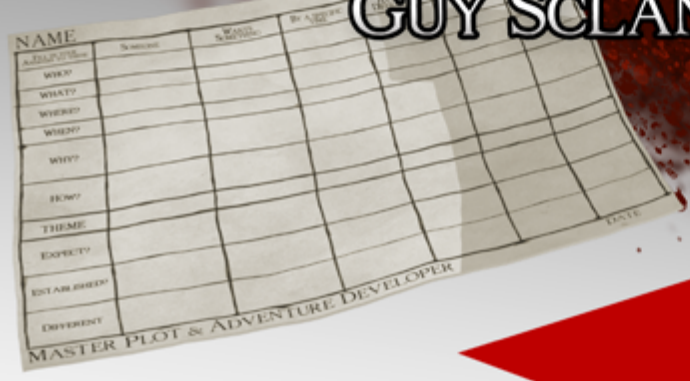
How to be a Great GM

Presents

Creating Epic Campaigns

Written by Guy Sclanders



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Producers: Guy Sclanders, Derrick Greyvensteyn
Editors: Janet Forbes, Sherry Voges, Jenny Andersson
Proof Readers: Suz Lock, Michael Kesevan, Andrew Scarr, Kerri Smith, James Donovan, Brandon Sallot
Artist: Guy Sclanders
Websites of Value: www.greatgamemaster.com, www.worldanvil.com
Disclaimer: Players harmed in the making of this book entered into games with Guy knowing the risks and accepted the consequences.
Dedicated to: The Web Goblin. Without him, there would be no "How to be a Great GM". Others have certainly made considerable contribution but the Web Goblin has been there from the beginning and continues to inspire me.

I also dedicate this book to my patrons who have been part of this journey. Their contribution has been to keep me going, and alive, and to be a constant source of joy and encouragement.

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The bait and switch...



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Foreword

Whenever someone tells me about the amazing campaign that they're writing, the first advice I give is, "Enjoy control while it lasts." It sounds sort of ominous, even threatening, doesn't it? It's not meant to.

World and story-building are fun. They're addictive. You, as the Game Master, have complete and total control over this universe, sprinkling little gems of brilliance here and there, giving it rich history and depth. It's your baby. Be proud of it. Love it. But prepare yourself for the day your baby grows up. Absolute control of your campaign ends the instant the first session begins. At this moment, it's no longer yours as the Game Master's, but yours as the Group's.

Your players won't just inhabit and interact with the world and story you've carefully cultivated. They will change it. There might be parts, even amazing ones, that don't grab their attention. There might be throw-away details that were intended as only a little window-dressing that they latch on to. This is all before the chaos-factor of dice-rolling comes into play (Dice don't give one hoot about your beautiful campaign. They're inconsiderate like that). Don't fight it. Roll with it (Get it?).

Game Mastering is a lot like juggling. If one ball gets dropped, don't stop everything to pick up one ball, and losing all the rest in the process. Improvisation and Adaptation are going to be your best friends. As they say, 'The show must go on.' The campaign may very well go in a different direction than you'd initially imagined. I find it easier to just accept that up front. Now, this isn't to say you should allow your players absolute control. That leads to anarchy, frustration, and often the campaign's implosion. We can't have that. You are, after all, the Master of the Game.

You have considerable power. But charging full-force, regardless of resistance, in the direction you originally intended, rarely ends in a good time by anyone at the table.

When I first started Game Mastering, there weren't many resources to help me out. Like Guy, I learned through trial and error (There was a whole lot of error in my case). The insight in the following pages would have saved my players and I a lot of frustration. They still might.

Over the decades, I've run many campaigns across many systems. Some have worked beautifully. Some have exploded in flames. On a few occasions, the campaign has followed the original plan beat-for-beat and gone 100% as I'd designed (cue Hannibal Smith grinning around a cigar, "I love it when a plan comes together."). Other times, it has skewed into a wildly different direction than I'd ever imagined. Go with it. Hell, pop that cigar into your mouth and proudly tell the players that it was your plan all along. Your job is to give them an exciting and memorable game. There's no harm in making yourself look like a genius for it (Players love it when they believe their GM is a genius. Hopefully, mine will never figure out the truth).

Gaming is a group effort. While your task is to give them an exciting and epic campaign (and I know you will because you're reading this book), your primary job, above anything else, is to entertain your players. As long as you do that, then your players will love it.

Enjoy your control while it lasts. Let your campaign grow and evolve. But most of all, have fun.

Seth Skorkowsky
Flower Mound, 2018



Introduction

This book, for I am reliably informed by the goblins that this is indeed a book, is about sharing some of the methods by which I create a campaign for my players. Within these pages you will hear me decry the nature of players, curse the nature of storytelling, and proclaim methods of genius for my own works. Let me assure, you dear reader, that this is most certainly not the true case. I was cursed with a mixture of Monty Python, Basil Fawlty, and a very British upbringing in a very non-British world. The result is a rather bizarre sense of self-assured arrogance which is completely false because I am usually naked, holding a fish called Wanda and in the wrong flat. If you get that reference you get me.

I digress – you'd better get used to that, it happens a lot – the point is: You want to create an amazing game. To do that requires a certain amount of healthy, playful manipulation of your players. Let the liberals wail! Oh woe! But nay I say. Nay. We expect that a good game of role-playing has adventure, bigger and bolder-than-life moments. We want action, we want heroes, and we want to save the prince in distress. You cannot achieve that with several humans all trying to do it at once. With confidence I can tell you it doesn't happen.

At least not to the level that we hold our narratives – a coherent, dramatic tale.
This means you need a leader. Someone who will direct, edit, and guide the fiasco that is the game. That person must be you, the Game Master. No one else holds the power to do it, and far too often I find – when I'm playing – that I try to do it if the Game Master isn't. It's a horrid habit, and one that I am slowly learning to control.

Leaders are required to do many things, but most critical of all, they are required to make decisions. Those decisions, whether right or wrong, will guide everyone else.

READ THE WHOLE BOOK FIRST BEFORE TRYING TO USE IT! TRUST ME – IT HURTS LESS.

So, in this book I hope to teach you my tricks, my manipulations, my guides that will help you lead your merry band. This is not to say that the player is not vital. Without the players you are a scriptwriter or a novelist. And you are not role-playing. So, although I may throw a disparaging word at the players, and I may vaunt the Game Master as a narrative genius it is always said with this behind it:

You are there to co-create an amazing story with the players. You create the plot, and they create the story. Without them you are simply playing with yourself and if you need a book on how to do that then you're doing it wrong.

These methods I describe come from nearly thirty years and hundreds, if not thousands of hours of roleplaying and my twenty-year career in television as a scriptwriter. I use them in my games, and throughout the book I will refer to my YouTube Channels – "How to be a Great Game Master" and "Bacon Battalion RPG". I refer to them not because I want increased viewership or more subscribers (that is a bonus) but I refer to them to demonstrate how I used the techniques I describe and the ramification so that you can go and physically look, watch, and see it in action. It is not critical, and I doubt you'll lose anything by not watching these videos.



I hope that this book will help you create the backbone of your campaign – the Master Plot – that will see your game become an epic such that your players leave your table smiling, talking, and excited to return. For me, the greatest moment comes from my players talking to me outside of the game about their suspicions, dreams, and goals within my game. Think about this remarkable privilege that you get to have. Another human being is exploring a space you've created and loves what they find there. It's a strange notion that another human is inspired by your imagination.

Oh, you thought I was done? You will learn… no seriously, you'll learn dozens of things in this book. Hell, it may even feel like it's too much. You can't keep track of the game and all this plot nonsense at the same time. And no, you can't. You also can't implement it all at once. It takes time to absorb, to entrench. And that really is what you need to do – take a chapter, read it, turn it over in your mind, understand what it is trying to say rather than what it says.

See the idea, the purpose, and then make it your own. Test it. I think I've written each chapter so that it can be used individually in a game session. Practise using it. Ask your players for feedback – hey, did you notice that I did X? If they say no, then you did it correctly. If they say yes, ask them how they felt about it. If they liked it, you're doing it correctly. If it felt forced, or they didn't like it, maybe you need to practice more… and kill off their characters! No. No, don't do that! See, I can't help myself. I really can't. I need players. I love my players… seriously.

Take heart however, I cannot tell you how many players I've lost because of failing as a GM. How many groups have fallen apart because of things I did.

So even if you try and don't get it right at first, try again, and soon you'll know the 121, the Sudden Reveal, and how to Seed a garden. The way this book works, just by the by, is in the following steps:

Master Plot Sentence
Theme
Nemesis design
Plotting out the Master Sentence
Adventure outlines
Adventures
NPCs

That is the order in which I work out my campaigns. There are chapters in between which talk about all kinds of things so don't worry, there is more to this book than meets the eye. You can just read a single chapter and then start working on your campaign, but the chapters do build upon one another so jumping right into the middle of the book may be confusing. Without further pre-amble… No wait, there is more amble!

My methods and approaches work for ALL game systems and game settings. I won't tell you how to balance an encounter for Dungeons and Dragons, or what dice to roll for a Star Wars campaign. If I give an example of a fantasy setting know that it could be easily a sci-fi setting, or a horror setting or a modern setting.

When I suggest making the players do a check or skill challenge, generally most game systems have a method of determining character action outcomes – I'm merely suggesting you use your systems functions for doing so. We are lucky – good plots don't care about genre. Although certain genres can have a dramatic impact on the plot, it is assumed to be neutral in this book. Now! Fly, you fools! Turn to the next chapter.





The Red Rider, Dathshiba the Black.

Where to Start?

Someone wants something badly by a specific time and is having difficulty getting it using something because of reasons.

Fans of the channel, "How to be a Great GM", will know that this is my turn-to phrase – well, at least perhaps the simpler version: Someone wants something badly and is having difficulty getting it. It is the only plot that we as a species on planet Earth have managed to invent that satisfies us from a narrative perspective. Any story that isn't considered 'art' will use this as its fundamental backbone. This means that we too need to use it in our games. And if you do, your storytelling, your plots and your adventures will be second to none.

IMPORTANT
The Master Plot is very different from the story.

A Master Plot is the grand canvas upon which the story will emerge. This grand canvas must have adventures, NPCs, settings, encounters, and a dozen other things painted over it for it to be an interesting canvas. You, the Game Master, are solely responsible for this painting.

The story, on the other hand, is the colour, the shape, and meaning of the art on the canvas. It is how the plot unfolds. I always hated this description in script writing class – it didn't help me at all. The story is the decisions that the heroes make when dealing with issues that have arisen because of the plot. The players are solely responsible for the story. If you find yourself telling the story then you have failed, and your players are no longer involved.

Imagine a clear flat lake. You as the Master Plot maker, as the Game Master, have at your disposal dozens of large round stones. With these you can trace out a path from one side to the other. However, because direct paths are seldom interesting, you can create branching paths, parallel paths and diagonal paths that crisscross the lake. The plot is set. You have done your duty. You have creatively laid out the stones.

Now the players arrive. They all have their own ideas about how to move across the paths. Some like to test the stones for stability first. Others love to rush ahead, skipping merrily. A few have brought their own stones which they will throw out from time to time. That's OK because you have some extra stones to add to theirs to bring them back to the paths you've set down. But the players ultimately get to decide their path. Some stones wobble, and the players must learn to balance, or jump quickly. They work together, they work separately.

When they reach the last stone, the only stone left, they land upon it, and then the journey is over. If you have placed the stones carefully, that final stone will be a magnificent step for the players. You didn't tell them which way to go, or how to move from stone to stone. You merely coaxed them from time to time. Failure of the game is when the players run out of stones or run into dead ends.
Does that help?

Plot equals GM, Story equals Player.
Adventures are plot meeting story. Story is not plot based, story is generally reactionary to plot events. Plot events should react to story events. Plot happens. Story emerges.

Plot also is not the plan. There is no plan. There is a route that the plot has laid out, however that route is not fixed. The only things that are fixed are the start and the goal. Everything in-between is optional.



Story doesn't exist until it is created in reaction to the start of the plot. Does that help? I think it does. I feel better. Therefore, we need to know where to start and what the goal is to begin. Yes?

Yes. And this brings us back to that sentence…
If we break it down, and because this is a book, I'm going to use the long version:
Someone wants something badly by a specific time and is having difficulty getting it using something because of reasons.

This gives us a start, or rather, a place to look for a start. And it definitely gives us a goal within a time frame. Here are a few fundamentals: There must be a time frame for the Nemesis's plan. If there isn't a time frame you end up with a ten-book novel saga that doesn't know how to end. The time frame could be millennia. But the clock is there and it is ticking. There must be a goal. Without a goal, there is no purpose and without purpose, there is well… jack. I love Game Masters who say they have no goals for their villains. That's great. If it works, good for you!

I don't know how it could, so either you are lying and you find a goal whilst playing, or you don't run long campaigns that end with satisfaction. We also must have a someone, or something, the antagonistic force, as Hollywood likes to call it. I don't. Nature isn't an antagonistic force – it doesn't care. It doesn't have a goal. It is an event, it happens. It causes problems but it isn't actively working against the players. It might feel like it, but unless there is a crazy mad-scientist controlling the weather, it isn't.

So, someone or something, a time frame, and a goal. Remember that. Book done. The rest of the pages expand upon those points and a just filler really. But, like all things, only once you know the expanded theory can you get on with it and make it look effortless. Sorry, no short cuts. So, get on with it. Yes. On with it!

Out in the deserts of New Lorhario, a good bullet is hard to find.



Someone

This, in most cases is your primary Nemesis. Now hang on, I know, roleplaying is supposed to be about the characters' journey and the hero's decisions. Yes, I agree. But for there to be heroes, there needs to be something for them to be heroic about. Luke Skywalker wouldn't be awesome if the Empire was not being evil, Sherlock Holmes wouldn't be a great detective if no crime was committed. Your players' characters simply cannot be heroes if there is nothing to hero against. So, who is that person they must hero against? Your Nemesis (I'll unpack Nemesis, villain, and henchmen later).

So back to this Someone…

Who is this someone? In the next chapter we handle how to make this someone interesting and cool. For now, we're just going to say she is the Empress Ilianna, The ruler of a vast empire. She rules with an iron fist and commands absolute loyalty. (I just made all that up, and throughout this book you will be expected to do the same – that's your job, to make sh…stuff up.)

To clarify: the someone could be a something, a power, or a group. Collectively their goal is to achieve an outcome – see below. However, this complicates the plot (for the better if you know how to do it correctly). Use groups of people who act in unison, or non-leader-based groups, if you will, once you are comfortable with using a single antagonist.

Wants something…

You guessed it, in the chapter after next, we will look at how to come up with cool desires and wants for your Nemesis. Just be patient; all in good time... Well as fast as you can read and understand I guess...

Empress Ilianna wants to ensure the loyalty of the dark dukes who make up her realm.

That's pretty much what all rulers want right? Obey me, don't betray me. And that is pretty much what they always do, right? Betray I mean. It's a weak plan, but we must start somewhere and here is a digression that I shall make:

Planning your game is all about adjusting, fixing and repairing your ideas. You must start somewhere so when I begin, I write out the sentence about someone wanting something etc., and then fill in the blanks. I will even sit there and shout at myself for being boring. But it is OK – because this is a first pass. This whole book is about turning that boring idea into something that will leave your players breathless at the end. Trust me, boring is good – boring means you have filled in a blank and now have something to work with as opposed to sitting for days lamenting over a dozen ideas and trying not to be boring and ending up with nothing. Back to her highness, she needs a time frame.

Empress Ilianna wants to ensure the loyalty of the dark dukes who make up her realm by the day of her resurrection…

I don't know where that came from. But it's a time frame. We needed a time frame so I thought of something that involved time.

It could have been her marriage, her funeral, her graduation from evil empress college, her son's coming of age… there are so many things. It could be far more esoteric, it could be by the next full moon, by the turning of the tides, by the flight of the first humming-bird after the last lark's call. Who knows? I don't! I chose a random statement.



Now this random statement has done a lot of things that are very critical to making a good plot – it fired off a thousand questions in my head which I must now answer:

Why her resurrection day? When is that? Wait… her resurrection day? WTF? Why is she being resurrected? And that means she knows she is going to die? How is she going to die? How did she know? Who is going to resurrect her? Why does she care that the dukes are loyal?

Difficulty getting it

These are questions we will answer in time. For now, we must focus! We haven't finished writing our plot:

Empress Ilianna wants to ensure the loyalty of the dark dukes who make up her realm by the day of her resurrection, but she is having difficulty securing that loyalty, using the threat of destruction.

Your Nemesis must be trying to do something to get what they want. It doesn't matter specifically what it is because the players characters are going to blunder in and destroy it all anyway.

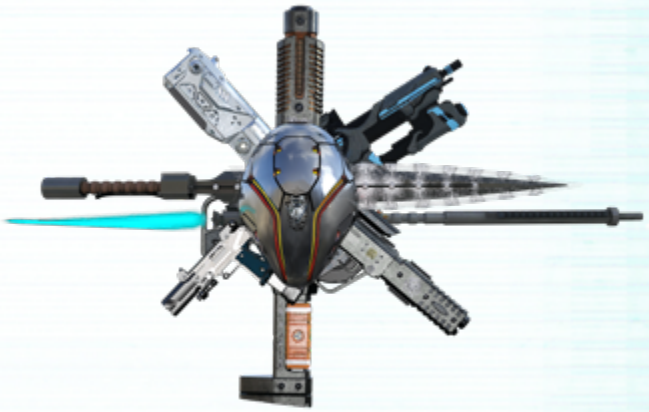
You do need a starting point, so pick one. She is threatening to destroy the dark dukes if they don't remain loyal. That's a fairly straight-forward one. She could have used an army of undead, a curse, a financial accounting package so skewed as to bring about the ruination of the dukes through sub-levies and minor wagon wheel tax…

it doesn't really matter at this point. Remember, we just need to finish the damned sentence, OK? We'll come back and laugh later at the idea of wagon wheel tax… a hoof tax would be much better. Anyway…

Empress Ilianna wants to ensure the loyalty of the dark dukes who make up her realm by the day of her resurrection but she is having difficulty securing that loyalty using the threat of destruction because of the rebellion.

Yay! We have our plot. The rebellion is keeping her dukes from being loyal so she can't achieve her goal. That is excellent. It isn't a unique plot, but there are one or two elements that are curious: Her resurrection (yes, I'm proud of this little nugget of inspiration) and the need for loyalty. Why do the dark dukes need to be loyal? What does that have to do with the resurrection? Why does the rebellion prevent her use of threatening destruction from working? That's fairly easy to answer, the dukes see resistance as something of an option.

So many questions and that is exactly where you want to be when working out your Master Plot. And for that matter, all your subplots, side quests, character journey quests, random adventure quests and anything else involving a plot. Because in answering these questions you solve the sentence and have a solid base from which to work.



There are a million solutions to these questions, and a million ways to fill in the blanks… The sentence in blank form looks like this:

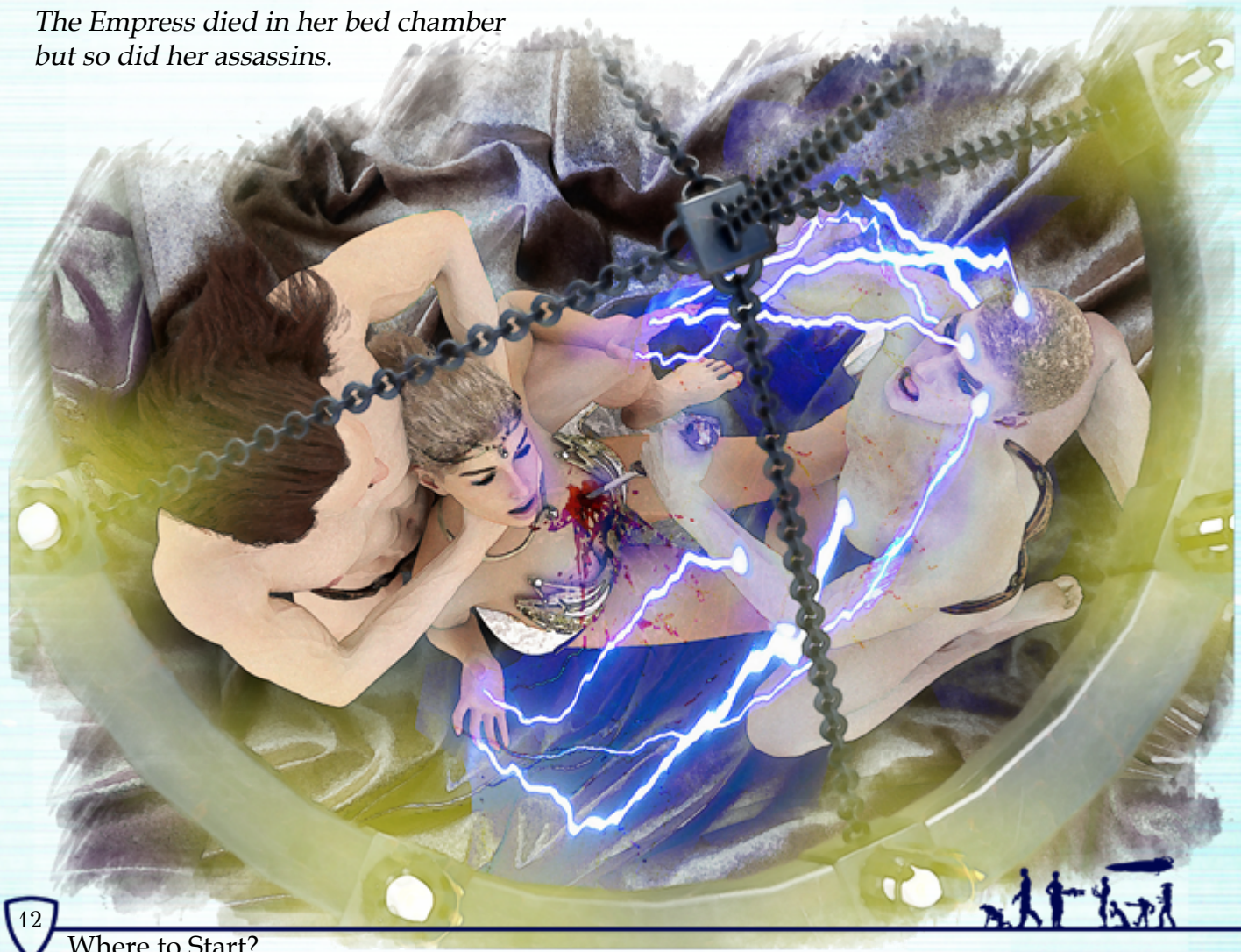
(someone)_____ wants (something) _____ by the/a (time frame) _____ and is having difficulty getting it using (action)_____ because (reason can't get it) _____

Each time you fill this in, it gets infinitely easier. (That is a total lie, but I've got to get sales right? It becomes more pleasurable as you seek to find cooler and better answers, it just becomes more difficult as you try to better yourself over your last Master Plot.)
Armed now with a complete sentence:

Empress Ilianna wants to ensure the loyalty of the dark dukes who make up her realm by the day of her resurrection, but she is having difficulty securing that loyalty using the threat of destruction because of the rebellion.

This is our Master Plot! Huzzah! Wrong. This is the outline of our Master Plot. We need to take it apart now that we've put it together so we can discover the actual Master Plot!

The Empress died in her bed chamber but so did her assassins.



We take it apart using the following instruments of dissection:

Who
What
Where
When
Why
How

You all know those questions – they get thrown at us all the time because as humans we like to have answers to them. It makes us feel as if we have the full picture. This means, by the by, that we need to figure out how to tell this all to the players without telling it to the players… yeah. Just what I said. Onward!

Who?

Empress Ilianna, Empress of a large empire, cold and mean and seeking only her own resurrection.

The Dark Dukes, rulers within the empire, responsible for maintaining order and providing the Empress with power.

The Rebellion, a feisty group of people from Alderaan.

I can see this is going no-where slowly. Alderaan? Seriously? I'll try to curb my cross-cultural references (hint: I'm going to fail).

We continue to work through answering the questions by making small statements. We'll come back to these statements later and check and compare and adjust as we go. Just relax.

What?

Typical for my example I choose a difficult one. So, in this instance *what* refers to loyalty, rebellion, dissent, and power. The Empress wants loyalty, her dukes might be in dissent, and the rebels clearly want her out, so what is at stake is power. For your first few Master Plots I'd suggest making it a thing: A ring, A cloak of power, the galaxy… As a side note, *what* usually refers to "what is at stake", "what is wanted" to be obtained.

Where?

The Empire of Ilianna and the dukedoms of the Dark Dukes. This does not describe all the locations we'll go through in each adventure, merely ballpark spaces for our minds to wander in. At this point we're still just building up spaces and ideas so don't stress too much.

When?

This answer is easy – before her resurrection. The entire Master Plot hinges on that moment in time. We could choose that to be in 4 years, 4 months, or if we really wanted an intense game within 4 days. But for now, let us work it as within 4 months. It is deepest Autumn, so in 4 months Spring will burst into being and Her Highness will be resurrected. Spring = rebirth. Bite me, you come up with better. I'm under a lot of stress to write this book. Spring.



Why?

Why before her resurrection? Well, why is she being resurrected in the first place? Time for one of those moments of frantic ceiling watching… What if she was being resurrected because she is actually dead, ruling from an exiled plane she was cast into, or something? Her resurrection is because the dark dukes have found her the perfect host into which to be resurrected. Hey it worked for *The Mummy* films of the late 1990s. OK great. That explains why she needs their loyalty. They have to find the vessel for her to resurrect into.

How?

So why and how can she threaten them to do her bidding? She can influence people perhaps? Nah, what if she can inhabit certain bodies? Call them Sarcophogi – constructs that reside in each of the dukes' castles - and, of course, a big one lives in the Empress's castle. She can flit from one to another – kinda like a reverse phylactery.

Do you see how the chain of thought follows those six questions and begins to flesh out a full picture? An undead spirit Empress who inhabits these powerful constructs is waiting for Spring so that she can resurrect into a body that has been found for her by her snivelling dukes. However, the Rebellion is causing problems. How? And Why? We return to our questions.

Firstly, who is the Rebellion? A bunch of noble upstarts? A few farmers disgruntled with the wheel tax? Stop it… enough with the wheels. A few magic users? A church? A holy order? A dragon who seeks its own power?

Typically, the rebellion should stand for everything the Empress does not. Kindness, equality, freedom. That reeks of a paladin leading a crusade. But not just any paladin – a fallen paladin. Perhaps one who even served the Empress many years ago, before she died and left the prime material plane? I can work with that. So, an ex-paladin of the Empress is rising up against her because he doesn't… He doesn't want her to return and would instead see the Empire collapse and be reborn into a fairer and more just place. But how do you do that? How to you compel an Empire to turn on its heels?

Well, to answer that question I turn to history and as I'm sure you'll agree: The death of Alexander the Great. Don't worry I won't bore you with a bad history lesson; suffice it to say: Alexander had a nice empire, he died, and all his generals went at each other like a pack of hyenas on crack-cocaine. They tore his empire to pieces, claimed bits for themselves and proceeded to go to war with one another, because there was no one there to stop them from doing it.

So, if the ex-paladin can show the Dark Dukes that the Empress can be fought against, can be denied, then they will turn on one another. Boom – end of the dukes, and long live the ex-paladin. That is his goal in big broad strokes.

Get coffee and come back, we're not done. But we have our Master Plot. We have a Big Bad Nemesis who is desperate to resurrect. We have some minion dukes who will be our principal villains, and we have a potential force for our players – the rebellion...



You may have noticed at no point in this entire plan have we even considered the players or their characters. There is a very specific reason for that. We are Great Game Masters. And we know that you cannot have heroes without villains. We need this for our heroes. If we only had heroes we wouldn't have a story. This is our Master Plot. It will be the skeleton upon which many more layers will be added, until we end up with the heroes being amazing, riding the dragon into the fiery belly of Hell and walking away unscathed.

Refine your sentence. Mull it over. Think about it. Test your answers to the questions it asks. Turn things on their heads. Here is an example for you to contemplate, or skip if you don't like …reading…

We need look no further than a great work: The Lord of the Rings. The Master Plot was very different from the Story. The Master Plot (in my opinion) was this:

Sauron wants dominion over all of Middle Earth by the time he is restored to physical form but is having difficulty achieving that using massive armies of orcs, because the free peoples of Middle Earth are loosely united against him.

At no point is The Ring mentioned, Frodo, Gandalf, or anyone. Because that isn't the Master Plot. The Master Plot is this demented god wanting to get his land. And it spawns lots of questions: Why does he want dominion over it? Well, he felt it was his and he was denied it a long time ago. He exists as an evil eye and can manifest when he summons enough strength. His principal problem is that his armies cannot fight alone. Gondor, Rohan, the elves all stand in his way, and since they beat him once before he is naturally cautious. So, he seeks allies – Saruman, the Witch King of Angmar, and the southern peoples. Those allies help him move towards his goal. They help disrupt the free-peoples, the alliances and so on, buying Sauron time to gain power.

The Story is of two hobbits who defy tremendous odds, and journey from one side of the continent to the other to destroy a ring of power that is deemed to be too dangerous to be kept in one piece. In that story we learn of humans and elves that are in love, of lost kings, of great wizards and wonderful trees. That is the story that enchants us to this day; it is the story of the heroes. Poor Sauron isn't given much screen time at all. The logistics of raising those armies, the very delicate negotiations with Saruman, the border disputes that invariably arose when the southerners wanted to talk land distribution after the war, feeding the trolls – all ignored. Not to mention training the Fellbeasts.

And yet, without all of that in place, there would have been no story. More a travelogue. Selfies of Sam and Frodo at Rivendell, skinny dipping in the river, riding ponies, looking haggard but happy as they climbed Mount Doom. All very nice for New Zealand but rather a dull catalogue of events. We needed Sauron to try to capture them, for them to escape terrible things, and to decide to carry on under tremendous stress. Where did the stress come from? Sauron. Yup. Frodo needed Sauron much more than Sauron needed Frodo.



So that means that we, as Game Masters, must have our magnificent Master Plot handy so that the players and their characters can troop about it, mucking it up here and there, until finally they defeat the Big Bad without really ever knowing the true extent of the monster training that you went through to get them there.

You can now test out your sentence. Ask yourself – does this inspire adventures? Can I see a dozen or so adventures based on stopping this from happening? If we look at our sentence we have a few adventures: The Dark Dukes need to be fought, so that's like 4 of them, right? The Empress Sarcophogi must be battled. The virgin sacrifice rescued. The sacrificial temple stormed. The Rebellion will have at least a few adventures in it. The Empress herself must be battled. So yes. There are several adventures waiting to be explored here.

Again – and I cannot say this enough – your Master Plot does not need to be amazing. It needs to be functional. Amazing comes with age, experience and nuance. Functional comes with practice. The players will not berate you for not producing Game of Thrones 2.0 in your first campaign. They will berate you if you can't even get an adventure to make sense. Test your sentence and then move forward. Don't spend a huge amount of time on it. Like I said at the beginning of the chapter – you only need a someone, a time frame and a goal, and we have that. The rest is going to change as the players dig their grubby paws into the game.

From your sentence we can now begin the real work. The 'art' of the Master Plot. So let us start with the most important person – the Nemesis.

In my current YouTube campaign – the Adventures of the Windswift – the Nemesis has yet to be revealed. However, the first villain has been dealt with. In chapters 1, 2, and 3 we learn about her and the heroes that finally beat her.

Her goal was to overthrow the Order of the Hastari and replace it with a more militant order who would restore the exiled dragons (truly evil and sadistic overlords) to power, as she felt it was better under their old rule.

Once I had her goal, overthrow the Order from within by manipulating those she could and destroying those she could not, I had a clear path and plan for her to follow. What made it interesting was that my starting mission seemed to have nothing to do with her at first. Only at the conclusion did we get a sense she was involved. Only in season three did the players even learn her name. By that stage, the party had dealt with extinct ice-elves, desert elves, dwarves, cannibal centaurs, and finally the actual enemy.

My sentence read:
Gravla Tajak wants to restore the dragons by destroying the current orders that keep them exiled before she is discovered by the same orders she is trying to destroy. She can do this by converting all the members to her cause but she is having difficulty because some do not want to convert.

For a villain that is a fairly big goal, but I wanted my players to start the campaign with a bang and I wanted them to experience the Order that they are part of, and how it works, or doesn't. I also wanted to introduce the idea that there are individuals out there who want to bring back the dread dragons.



Only the bravest faced Mathazarkis,
the fire demon.



Nemesis

At the onset of making a nemesis, we need to think very carefully about their role in the story. We need to tie them into our theme. What is a theme? Yes, yes – it's another chapter. OK… we'll talk about theme. Nemesis will have to wait.

Theme

Although this may seem like dramatic overkill, when I begin designing a campaign I look to a theme that I want to explore. It's a big bold idea that I find interesting at the time. It could be betrayal, it could be love, it could be revenge, it could be power. Whatever your theme, and there are literally dozens, you should select at least one for your campaign. Here is a short list:

Crime doesn't pay
Love conquers all
Courage
Revenge
Power corrupts
Best intentions
Humanity versus evil / nature
Triumph of the spirit
Overcoming the odds
War
Greed

Want more? Ask Uncle Google.

In this case we use the word theme – you could call it your dramatic current, your guiding through line, your opportunity to speak out on something, your grandstand, your central idea… The idea is that your adventures will then be hinged around the theme. And yes, you can have a few themes mixed together: Acceptance during a time of war brings about human triumph against evil.

This is your campaign, you design it how you like. I just find having my theme allows me to focus my story telling and, in the long term, will help with adventures that I have to make up on the fly. If I know my theme and the Master Plot I can easily do it. And I'll tell you later. Hold your horses.

Go select your theme/s for your campaign.

That theme should then be expressed in your Master Plot. So, by way of continuing our campaign plan, if our theme is "Overcoming the Odds and the triumph of Spirit" (or not in the case of the Empress, haha) does that alter our Empress Ilianna's story? Well, not the sentence, but to everything in the sentence, if that makes sense?

Let me explain – we now need to align our notes and plans to show Overcoming the Odds. What does that even mean? What odds? Ah, so we need to explore the implications of our theme before just jamming it into our Master Plot. And how do we explore the implications? We ask questions – not the full battery, just a few:

What do we expect from that theme?
What has already been established around this theme?
What film/book/play/TV show/ newspaper article has this theme that I can refer to?
What can I do differently?

On the theme of Overcoming the Odds – what do we expect? We expect an underdog to rise up against an established authority or power and prove themselves worthy, with everything against them. It should take cunning, skill, determination, luck, and personal drive to make it happen.



What has been established on this theme? It is a story that we love to tell, and we have told it in so many ways – man overcoming dominant aliens to retake the planet, a handless man learning to paint with his feet and defying the odds, a young boy secretly learning ballet so he doesn't have to remain in his coal-mining hole of a town. We like these kinds of stories. It makes us feel like we can achieve anything. Of course, in this case it is the players' characters who are overcoming your NPC's power.

What film or book can I turn to? *Armageddon* – only way to save the world is to blow up the asteroid and it's a one-way trip but might just work… *Billy Elliot, Dinosaur, Star Wars* – take your pick.

Most of these had a few things in common that we expect: The hero was a new comer with little experience and was out of his depth. The big bad they fought against was a power that had been established for a while (social stigma, ancient asteroid, Emperor). Few people supported their chances of success, and most tried to stop them before they started.

This is all awesome stuff for us to use. Now how can you make it different? Overcoming the Odds does not play well if it's overcoming the minor things which weren't really a bother to begin with. If you do that, you end up with a *Superman* movie. So what can you change? Well you can change the situations around – and yes, there are books or movies that have done that, because we're all telling stories and as I've said, we've only got one plot. But again, it's how you tell it.

So instead of the hero being an outcast or downtrodden, what if they're part of the Empress's retinue? Work for her as guards or enforcers?

What if they start off as the system? We've got the rebellion to play with – maybe your player's characters start off by hunting them? Then slowly realize they are wrong? That requires some work to sell but it could be awesome. By playing around with what you can change, or simply by tweaking what is there, you start to put your own signature on the narrative.

Now we can examine our sentence again. How do we fit the theme into the sentence? What the hell was the sentence? I'll go find it. Drink your coffee.

Empress Ilianna wants to ensure the loyalty of the dark dukes who make up her realm by the day of her resurrection but, she is having difficulty securing that loyalty using the threat of destruction because of the rebellion.

Right. I found it. Theme – Overcoming the Odds. I like the idea of the characters starting off working for the Empress. It offers some good moral conflict choices and may just turn this whole campaign on its head if the players decide to continue to support her even after finding out the truth. Anyway, that's a dream for another time.

Like I said, the sentence doesn't need to change. The rebellion has to overcome the odds of stopping the dukes. Empress Ilianna has to overcome the odds of keeping the dukes loyal. The sentence smacks of overcoming the odds. It's a good sentence. However, what we do need to do is change how we express that sentence.

We want the player characters to ultimately overcome the odds and defeat the Empress. We do now. So that means we should establish that she is a huge 'odd' to overcome, as is each of the dukes. An Empress by nature is fairly powerful. We must make her more so.



She has her Sarcophogi that protect her. Perhaps there is also the 1000 immortals; palace guards of terrible power? And her fortress is on top of a mountain surrounded by a lake of fire or, for the traditionalist, water. The trick here is that we must always make sure that however insurmountable the odds may seem, there is a surmountable solution. Otherwise our players, not their characters, will lose heart.

The Empress needs to be awe-inspiring and powerful and we must demonstrate that in the first encounter with her. She is the ultimate power. Collectively the dukes need to be unstoppable; massive armies, large territories, shadow assassins or giant ogres at their command. Seemingly impossible for a single group of heroes to defeat.

The rebellion also needs to be underwhelmingly weak. Thematically, the resistance will gain strength as the heroes move through the campaign, until it is totally wiped out by the Empress – remember as much as the heroes might succeed in their quests, and they must, we need to keep the theme coming back – overwhelming odds and we have to keep those odds overwhelming. We will be walking a tightrope of tension. We need our players to have wins, to achieve and accomplish, but we also need to push the theme – right up to the final terrific end.

To be clear, the theme does not have to be represented in every quest, only those that link directly to the Master Plot. If you can weave it into your subplots that is excellent. But sometimes there can only be so many downtrodden peasants rising up against the odds. I also hope you notice that the theme is used to focus our expression of plot because we cannot tell our players what our theme is, we must show them through plot events.

How we do that is part art, part tactic, and part luck. This is only one book so I can't go into significant detail on how to make those happen. I shall try to be brief.

The *Art of The Theme* is showing it in different ways and from different perspectives. Hollywood calls it Semiotics. A black curtain behind a character may signify evil, or impending sadness. A small toy car being dropped by a schoolboy may foreshadow the actual car accident which leaves the boy's father blind. Films have many people working on them to bring these ideas to life. You are usually operating alone. I try to find one or two strong images for each space, character, and plot to represent my theme.

Consider: a visual description of this massive dark castle hanging over the town that has a single rose bush climbing its one side, bringing colour to its greyness. That rose is defying the odds and is overcoming the castle's dominance. It is the expression of your theme in a visual manner, and a rather useful ladder into the damned castle. It is up to you how much you want to pack into your descriptions.

Tactically, you can use descriptions (I say descriptions as I usually don't have much visual aide in my games. I'm a "theatre of the mind" style GM. You can use images, models etc. to accomplish this as well) to keep the theme alive. Not every location needs to have a symbolic reference. Sometimes you can just describe a field on the side of the road. The characters notice some kids bullying another, pushing it into the mud. At first the kid fights back, but only gets more mud on it. Then it changes its attitude and begins to hug the other kids – covering them in mud, and cleaning mud from itself at the same time. Soon all the kids are covered in mud except for the first who is now triumphant. It's a small detail but it pushes the theme.



From the shadows the tentacles reach, a soul to breach...



Luck will appear from time to time when you've set-up a scene that has overwhelming odds and the players' characters manage to win anyway. Players are fantastic at getting into these kinds of situations. Next time it happens, and it fits your theme, have an NPC spell it out for them afterward. 'Gosh you really showed them, hey? Good for you! The little guy beating the big guy for once.'

Repeat it often enough in these different forms and the players will pick up on it. Because most of us can't help but form associations with stuff, once the mind-worm of your theme has been seen, the brain will develop expectations. We can't help ourselves. It is what humans do. Now, theme is giving us three weapons:

It will **help focus** our thinking,
It gives us **inspiration** to give better descriptions,
It can **influence** and affect our players expectations of the game.

Still convinced that theme is not important? I know a few people who feel I think too much into the campaigns I create. Maybe, maybe not! And now as requested by my patrons and supporters, here is the template I use to bring all this together!

NAME

Fill in your Answers to these	Someone	Wants Something	By a specific time	Having Difficulty	Using	Because...
WHO?						
WHAT?						
WHERE?						
WHEN?						
WHY?						
HOW?						
THEME						
EXPECT?						
ESTABLISHED?						
DIFFERENT						

MASTER PLOT & ADVENTURE DEVELOPER DATE

The above table is an amalgam of the basics of "The Sentence" and the "Theme". By placing them in this way you can check each item in the sentence against the usual questions, as well as, the theme questions. It doesn't need to be full answers each time – just key words to help guide you.

Using just the first question: Who?
Starting with:

Someone

Who?
Empress Ilianna

Wants something

Who?
A body to be resurrected in

By a specific time

Who?
The dark dukes will find the body

Having Difficulty

Who?
The PC's keep interfering

Using

Who?
An elite unit of scouts known as the Panhellion.

Because...

Who?
The Panhellion can't see in sunlight.

Now these answers are all speaking to the Who.



We can then go back and start to answer the next question, *what*, in the same manner.

The row *theme*, when we get to it, prompts you to decide how the Theme relates to each component of The Sentence. How does our theme of Overcoming impossible Odds apply to our sentence?

Someone

Empress Ilianna will be incredibly powerful in her Sarcophogi. In order to overcome them the PCs will need to discover the secret of their operation, otherwise they will not be able to defeat her.

Wants something

The bigger picture is her resurrection but she needs a few components - such as the virgin. We can apply this to all of them, or just to her bigger plan. Either way, with the theme we adjust it so that her return is highly unlikely if she doesn't have all the components gathered at the right time. Only a series of monumental acts will achieve her goal.

By a specific time

Time marches on and every delay will make the chances of overcoming the odds more difficult. Thus we need to have a strong concept in our game of time progressing. Perhaps we need a calendar that can keep track of days?

Having difficulty

We keep the Odds high by using a method known as increased complication. Each win is complicated by a new development. It keeps things tough for Empress and PC alike.

Using

The Panhellion scouts are super elite assassins capable of tracking the flight of a bee in a hurricane. To avoid or escape them will be to overcome tremendous odds.

Because...

Although they cannot see in sunlight - they can move through shadows, so if you cast a shadow you can be attacked - so overcoming that will be interesting.

Then when we look at what is expected, we work through the same ideas again but we ask ourselves - what do we expect from the Who or the What or the Where etc.? What do we expect from the answers we have provided above? It gives us the chance to see what our players might be seeing, as well as to understand the kind of story we are telling.

That helps us to then answer the Established question - what has been established on the above - and how do we establish it if this is the first time the PC's are encountering it. What has been done in TV and literature that we could use - are elves like Anime elves, Pratchett's elves, or Tolkien's elves?

Finally you have the chance to go through your sentence step by step to make it different - your answers to the *Expect* and *Established* blocks will guide you, and your answers to everything else should inspire you.

You may need multiple copies of that worksheet to complete your entire plan, and please remember, we don't need to go too deeply into the plot here - you're creating opportunities for plot later, not setting everything in stone now.



Once you have all your answers you should have a pretty good idea of your overall Master Plot. Now you can see the ramifications of what happens when the PCs deny an outcome for the Nemesis. You should also be able to see whether you'll need to add or remove adventures when we are doing your adventure breakdown later. Remember the players need to be able to answer the question at the end of the game:

What was The Sentence for the game?

They can only answer if you have made sure they've worked through your points step by step, adventure by adventure. And they can only do that if you have provided them adventures within which to discover your points!

Theme versus Player Character

Although we have used the theme we have chosen to help guide us, and trust me we are not done with theme yet, how does it apply to the players' characters outside the master plot? It affects the master plot, and everything we as Game Masters do, so surely there should be a tie in with the PC's?

The answer is yes, and it will stretch you to do it. Hopefully you'll have a chance to have some input on the characters your players are making before they join your game.

I don't advocate, and never will, that the GM interfere with the players character creation. That is the players' space. You can advise and guide, you can offer insight into the campaign world if you have it. What you should be doing is looking for moments in their character's backstory and in their character descriptions that link into your theme.

By seeking out moments in their backstories that fit your theme you can then neatly design an adventure for the character that demonstrates your theme, whilst at the same time, helps them to explore their character. The challenge, of course, is this adventure you're planning has nothing to do with the Master Plot. It's a character adventure which is separate. So feel free to explore it as you like, but remember to include the theme!

It will make it seem as if the game has all been centred around the characters. And in a way, it is only centred around them, all else is irrelevant.

That is not the only time though we're going to be welding the theme on the characters past. Exploring a character's past is fantastic and I try to do it in every game I run. Equally, so is exploring their future or present really, just that it happens later. When the character decides to go off and do something for their character, part of your kit for creating adventures on the fly, will be to use the theme to help focus that adventure, and once again, bring it into the fold of the bigger narrative so that it always feels like everything fits together.

You might be thinking this is way too subtle, and no player will ever see this. You'd be right for a given value of right – but you'd also be wrong. Players may never appreciate the theme or be aware directly of its existence, but the game as a whole will feel as if it's all linked, all planned from the start, and wonderfully cohesive. They won't know why, they'll assume it was luck and chance. Until you do it again in the next campaign, and the next. And eventually you'll get stuck with the title of Great Game Master as people realize your games just seem to work.



I cannot tell you the amount of grand campaigns I've launched that have died. Some lasted for two sessions and ended. Others limped on for a month or two before being executed in the background. I tried different systems, different players, different roles, different snacks at the table. Nothing worked until I started to stamp a theme onto my games. Suddenly players wanted more, and campaigns took flight lasting longer and longer.

Also, we must go back to our Nemesis now. She has been waiting patiently.

"Harvest the planet..."



My theme for the Gravla Tajak opening adventure was "The Past versus the Present". I needed to show that the past is trying to destroy the present but that the present can win. My opening to the game was the destruction of one of the big (the present) airships, the Kadan Dachi. It was destroyed by a group of ice elves who were thought to be extinct (the past). The party found – miraculously surviving – a young boy named Meos who helped them solve the riddle of who had done it. Meos represented the present and the future.

Inside the long-forgotten Ziggurat (the past) our heroes encountered the first hints of this dark organization. The characters destroyed the temple (vanquishing the past) and took a prisoner. Due to one of the players characters being at odds with the party and ironically locked up in his own past (the character), he released the prisoner before she could talk.

This forced the characters to have to try to track her down in the deserts. Something they did and even through past instances of the Durahags, the sand people they encountered, destroying their enemies, due to skilful negotiation on behalf of the players, caused a wedding to happen and a bond to form. The triumph of the present over the past. Armed with information, a name, and a destination, the party set off.

Due to some interesting player choices they encountered an evil Graith – a race in my world notorious for being evil, violent, and extremely xenophobic. This one, however, extended an olive branch to help. I did a little seeding and had the players move onto the dwarves – a race stuck in their own history. The dwarves are depressed, broken, and beaten by actions that occurred 300 years before. Again, my theme of "The past versus the present".

One point I failed to mention in the game was that only the older captains of the Order had been converted. The younger ones remained resilient. It was planned to be there but wasn't. The villain in the final showdown, used mind -warping magic and sent the characters into their own past, where they needed to beat their emotional fear. Some excellent role-playing let this happen – past beaten by present – which really signified the end of the adventure. They destroyed Gravla and her lackies. This theme, by the way, continues into the rest of the campaign, so don't think it's just for this adventure.

If you watch the opening of the 4th season where we had auditions for new players to join, I needed a way to continue my theme but also to test out new players. The idea of a time-loop came to mind and so it was (the theme) inspirational in helping guide me on how to handle auditions whilst keeping the main story going.

My theme helped me solve a tricky situation in a way that I think, I hope, worked out as being a rather cool way to start an investigation. The adventure isn't finished at the time of writing this book, but suffice it to say, the entire adventure – set in the Drow underdark – will culminate wrapped up and around the idea of a time-loop – without feeling like a horrid cop-out on my behalf. I've set up enough references to make it work.



Toshiaki launched himself body and soul at Ryudaki...



Genre

This isn't going to be a long chapter – I promise. Genre is similar to theme insofar as it's another weapon we have in our pack to fight off writer's block, creator's angst, and Game Master blanking. Genre is a collective idea for a style and space for your setting. A brief list in our context of gaming:

Fantasy - High Magic – D&D
Fantasy - Low Magic – Lord of the Rings
Fantasy - No Magic – Vikings

Modern – Urban, no magic – Modern D20, High school settings
Modern – Magic – Urban Arcana, Mage, Vampire the Masquerade
Modern – Horror – Call of Cthulu

Historical – No magic – World War II, Pirates
Historical – Magic – Druids, Greek mythology, Steampunk

Sci-fi – No Magic – Cyberpunk
Sci-fi – Low Magic – Star Trek
Sci-fi – High Magic – Star Wars, Starfinder

It was in Ted's kitchen that Jane summoned the demon...



Then into any of those you can inject more specific genre-like trappings:

Political
War
Comedy
Investigation
Problem Solving
Suspense
Drama
Romance

So, you could have a Sci-fi, Magic, War setting – and you'd get something like "The Clone Wars" from the Star Wars period; where the focus is more on war, starships, and the Force. A Sci-fi, magic comedy is more like *Space Balls* where the focus is on the characters screwing up through adventures that are rather fanciful whilst in starships and using the force.

Your genre will help you to broadly identify what kind of adventures and outcomes your players will expect. Elsewhere in the book I talk about asking players what kind of game they want, and these types of questions can be tempered with at least figuring out the genre. That will help us when we're designing our adventures and, to a large degree, the details around our sentence.

Another great example would be to compare the differences of genres. If we look at *Star Trek: The Next Generation* – the show was very focused around 'peaceful, intelligent, and diplomatic resolutions and conflicts'. Contrast that to *Battlestar Galactica* which was about survival, large scale genocide, and heavy religious influence. Both Sci-fi, far future – but certainly not the same themes. The two – genre and theme - work hand in hand to set expectations and you should be aware of how they play out – what makes them stand out from one another so that you can keep that in mind when developing your master plot.

This is by no means an exhaustive list and you should look at the options of Genre available to you. What is important is that you talk to your players about it.

Why? Because, like ice-cream, not everyone loves Rocky Road. Some might prefer mint, or banana, or perhaps Avocado ice-cream. Similarly, players might like the idea of a political game set in a no magic fantasy setting, but do not like the idea of a political game set in a no magic historical setting. The reason? Familiarity.

Most often players who feel comfortable in a setting, in a genre, and a system will have the most fun, whilst those who are unfamiliar will struggle to connect with the game. Asking a player to quickly go and brush up on say a 1000 years of Greco-Roman history so that they can play in your game set in Carthage is a major barrier to entry.

It is not a reason not to propose games set in genre's or systems that your players unfamiliar with. We need to expand ourselves and our knowledge - and there is no better way than to do so in the context of a game. Just make sure your players are ready and willing to before you spend an afternoon writing your sentence about the wants of Theocolees from Sparta.

I told you this would be a short chapter... always keep your NPC's promises.





Vashakahn's time as champion ended when Uhuri found a gap...

Awesome Enemies

Right, we have our theme and a fairly good idea of how to start our Nemesis off. To begin with, she is going to be the hero and benefactor of the players' characters. Then she will become wrath itself. How did we get there? By twisting the theme and having our heroes starting out as having it all. Hopefully, they will – by adventure three or four – give it all up to become enemies of the Empress.

Nemesis, villain, henchmen… I keep saying nemesis. Why?

These are the three types of antagonists I like to use: henchmen, villains and nemeses. This is standard trope stuff. We will use them all, but only one gets to be the star of the Master Plot. The rest get adventures, and scenes.

> **Henchmen** are one-adventure wonders who are there to make the players feel good about defeating a bad guy.
>
> **Villains** are there to goad our players into staying in the game, but also gives them goal posts to aim for on their journey and feature across multiple adventures.
>
> The **Nemesis** is there to get under the players skin, so they keep coming back for a year and the entirety of the campaign.

The Empress is a Nemesis. The dukes are the villains. The duke's assassins, bounty hunters, crazed wizards, and the like are henchmen. With this pecking order you can see who needs the most work and who needs a few moments of thought.



The bad guys all need to be able to answer a few questions:

> **What is their goal?**
> **Why is that their goal?**
> **Do they have other goals?**

They may seem a little redundant but remember, you need to ensure that whatever you spend time on building helps you to run the game and tell a good, functional plot.

What is their goal?

This could be as simple as: kill the characters, nothing more. Usually it is:

> **Capture the characters**
> **Steal a certain object**
> **Delay the characters**
> **Get them lost in the wood**

How do you figure out their goal? It's complicated and can only really be done once we've looked at the adventure path.

Why is that their goal?
This is a leading question. The answer could be: Because they were instructed by a higher power to do it. Because they feel it is morally correct. Because they believe it is the right thing to do. This begins to open up character possibilities for the character. If they are a minion – a henchmen – orders are orders.

If we ask this of the Empress, why is her goal resurrection? It is a really complex answer that we'll need to write out – she wants to live forever and ensure no one can ever hurt her again like those who banished her did. So, she will rule over the whole world and ensure anyone with enough power to banish her is executed. To do this she'll establish an empire and hire telepaths to find great minds. All from one question…



Once Jane started feeding the sleeping player choco-sticks, the game was over...

Do they have other goals?
Most of the time the answer should be yes. It should also be: To live a happy life. This is a fact I find a lot of people forget. And yet, it can give you some of the best narrative drive in the game. Maybe they don't have other goals – mindless zombies, or cultists who are brainwashed. Maybe they don't want to face those other goals. But it sure as hell gives the average henchmen a bit more depth than just "kill party".

We now have a fairly good means of devising a bad person – we use the theme to define their goals or motivations, we ask three questions and have a world of solutions. But this isn't yet a great villain. We have more work to do. As much as we are telling a narrative with our fellow players we must remember we need to work within the human condition, we tend to see images clearer than thoughts.

Thus, in creating our henchmen, villains or nemeses, we would only be half way there if we simply stopped here. We need to give them defining characteristics, and yes, we'll use our theme to help guide us in our thought processes.

The goblins attack the caravan. Their goal is to get the gold. Their chief gave them the order. Their other goal is to return home for a quiet shag in the dark, a cigarette and then roast rabbit and a cold beer. Now if my players do anything crazy like talk to the goblin before it attacks, they can find out these goals, and find possible solutions – hire the goblins to help them find something and then everyone lives. If we didn't have that secondary goal, the scene plays out as a hack-and-slash. Yawn.

Physical Characteristics

Physical characteristics include things like armour, facial features, speech patterns, scent, smooth hands or rough, etc. The more you can describe, the better. How do you attach the theme? Well, give the person something that came from an event that was thematic. An orc warlord in our campaign needs something that talks about overcoming the odds? Give him a terrible scar that runs from his groin to his chin, causing him to drool when he talks. But he also uses as a crutch to walk (he limps because of the scar); it's made of a dragon's thighbone decorated with bits of old, dried skin from the beast. He overcame great odds to survive. That's an obvious example. Did you notice how easy it was to add a detail to the orc chieftain that has made him more than just an orc warlord. Now he has a history. He was once a magnificent warrior. Now he is not. Although he is still chieftain, he must hold some power over the others. This is the part I absolutely adore when designing a campaign. These stories and the details that suddenly pop into existence because of a thought I had, and have now been made real in my imagination. I love it.

We can describe the physical:

Sight, sound, smell, taste or touch



Any of those can be used. As a general rule, you should be using these all the time in your game anyway to describe rooms, environments, locations and the like.

We can describe the emotional behaviour of the NPC towards the party:

Depressed, excited, happy, morbid, secretive, furtive etc.

This gives players clues as to how they should treat the individual.

When you combine these together you get a fairly grounded individual who has some pretty awesome moments ahead of them. The more important their role in the plot, the more information you can add to their stories. A henchman who is merely a bounty hunter might get very little information.

Boba Fett, for example, in the original *Star Wars* movies from the 1970s and 1980s, was a henchman. We learned very little about him in the films except thst he liked to disintegrate people, didn't really back down from authority, and had a fairly good reputation for being a bounty hunter.

Later, for reasons unknown – because clearly it had nothing to do with the plot – we learned he was the son of some bloke (that was a twist) and that he became a bounty hunter because his dad died and he picked up the mantle. That is the last point I want to make on making awesome villains.

We need enough for them to fulfil their role in your story and no more. Don't write a forty-page biography for a henchman, or a villain for that matter. A paragraph for the henchman, a page if you must for the villain. Maybe the Nemesis gets more than a page. The players get information in the game in small, short sentences worth of detail.

There is nothing worse than when a PC asks an NPC 'do you know the villain Marboo.' To which the NPC begins a 20-minute dissertation on the history of Mad Marboo and his tortured youth. No one cares, least of all the players who are just trying to find out if Marboo has magical abilities or not. Just the single sentence: 'Oh? You mean Mad Marboo?' Gives the players everything they need to know, in as few words as possible.

If they want to know more, then you give them another sentence. They say he has the ability to enter your dreams and make you go mad. Bingo. Another golden nugget of information that should prevent the characters from sleeping

Alternatively – they say he wears a duck on his head during dinner. Bingo – classic misdirection. If the players don't ask about the duck, when they burst into Mad Marboo's dining chamber they will find him sitting under an enormous white mutant duck as it slowly rips apart a villager for him to eat. The deranged duck will now attack the characters with poison spines like a platypus, a yellow beak full of sharp teeth, and a quack of paralysis. (Description notes: emotive – deranged – visual – white duck, yellow bill – audio – quack of paralysis.)

This means you need to have a fair amount of information but only give out the barest minimum to your players. You need to have this info in your mind so you can give out the information, but you need the restraint to keep it back. I find that when I give less, the players ask for more. When I give too much, they glaze over and plan for the after-game happenings.

We now have a baddie who has goals and dreams and a physical description. Done? Nope. There is more.

Now, just keep in mind, once you are comfortable with the idea of theme driving the basis of the three broad areas of an NPC, you can make them up on the fly with confidence.

Ways to play a Nemesis

While we are on the subject of the Nemesis, it becomes important for you to decide what type of Nemesis you are going to use in your campaign. Traditionally there are two types of Nemeses, and thanks to modern day film making we have a third which is now considered acceptable.

The two traditional ones I like to call:

The Blunt Force Trauma
The Never Present

And the new TV inspired one:

Mentor

The Blunt Force Trauma (BFT)

The Blunt Force Trauma Nemesis is the direct contact, confrontational Nemesis. *Skeletor* from *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* is a great example. *Sauron* is another excellent example of a Nemesis who isn't subtle, who is known to the party and who seeks to destroy the party openly and without mercy.

These nemeses are the easiest to run in your game, because they're just big, tough bad-people who want to hurt the party.

Traditionally within your narrative structure – yup, another chapter later – you will want to have him or her meet the party early on in the campaign to establish them as the big bad and as a Blunt Force Trauma Nemesis.



Darth Vader was another example of a subtler yet still Blunt Force Trauma Nemesis (and yes, he was a villain not the Nemesis but the original *Star Wars* franchise is a wonderfully complex narrative so Vader is the Nemesis for *Luke*, not for *Yoda* for example).

During the initial confrontation the Blunt Force Trauma Nemesis is arrogant, may not even care about the characters and is just out to accomplish their goal. Traditionally the Nemesis kills someone close to the characters, a parent, child, village, planet, and does so in a callous and totally dispassionate way. This sets in motion the characters' journey to seek justice and defeat the big bad. The Nemesis will find it amusing that someone so small is trying to fight them and may from time to time openly engage with them, defeating them time and again. A word of warning – although the Nemesis will win these conflicts, your players should get a sense that they are slowly getting stronger against her or him, giving them a sense of accomplishment and advancement. If they lose all the time they may become disenchanted.

The Blunt Force Trauma Nemesis will require a final show-down with the characters that should test everything they have learned. This is the "defeat of the dragon at the top of the mountain" moment and you should be careful to make sure this is one of the most epic moments in the campaign. It is at this point that I advocate… cheating. Shut-up and listen. You have spent months, maybe years slowly getting your players' characters to face your Nemesis. You have written up the Nemesis and stated him or her to your fullest capacity. The characters start fighting the Nemesis, but you now realize some item the characters obtained 10 months ago has, with a combination of other random things you've handed out over the course of the game, turned your super powerful Nemesis into a weakling that poses no threat to the players' characters.

To have them kill/overcome the Nemesis in a round or two of rather dull action is so unsatisfying that your players will not congratulate themselves on having collected those amazing artefacts that allowed them to overcome the odds, they'll walk away wondering what it was all for. If you realize the game is going south and becoming dull, you need to cheat. On the fly, work out cleverly how to give the Nemesis some new edge. That makes him or her once again a terrible enemy and an epic end game battle. And yes, there is a chapter on Seeding solutions to problems you don't yet know about.

Blunt Force Trauma Nemeses need not be physically strong, but they must be powerful. These are qualities that you can incorporate into a BFT:

Strength
Presence
Bravado
Size
Visibility

Strength
Strength obviously refers to the Nemesis being strong and powerful – mentally, physically, magically or all of the above. Skeletor is exactly like this.

Presence
The Nemesis must have a presence, an atmosphere of fear and power. People should be afraid to be near the Nemesis and the Nemesis should radiate power. The Ring-wraiths from the Lord of the Rings, although not nemeses, are exactly like this. In some roleplaying games there is a mechanic called Fear Radius. The Nemesis should have that.



Bravado
The Nemesis should act as if the world is already theirs. There is no timidity, no unsure moves. Just absolute certainty that their will is right. Seldom do nemeses question their own decisions or competency. In complex books and television shows we might get to see that – *Game of Thrones* is a great example of where we see the 'human' side of the nemeses. But this isn't a book or a TV show, our players are unlikely to see much into the world of the Nemesis outside of when they are confronting the Nemesis and, in that case, the Nemesis will show no weakness, no fear.

Size
Although this is a combination of Presence and Bravado, the Nemesis needs to be larger than life. This might not be physically, it could be in colour of dress, features, floating – we need our characters to be able to see their Nemesis from across the battlefield, in a crowded ballroom, or in a market full of traders. They have no need to hide, no need to skulk in the shadows. Why should they? Give your Nemesis something that makes it stand out – bright clothing, fancy armour, a giant flaming eyeball… you get the idea.

Visibility
Wait isn't this the same as Size or Presence? No. Well yes, but different. Visibility refers to the BFT Nemesis always having an impact on the characters. And by always, I mean always when you are advancing the Master Plot through quests. Let me explain: the BFT Nemesis needs to be a force in the characters' world – ever there, ever looming.

So, the characters engage with a random orc chieftain and when they defeat him they find out he was armoured by the BFT Nemesis, or his troops were trained by the BFT and that he was acting specifically under the BFT's orders. This shouldn't be hidden or subtle. It should be obvious. The *Uruk-hai* of *Saruman* in *the Lord of the Rings* had that giant White Hand painted everywhere so that we knew exactly who had sent them. By keeping the BFT involved even when not directly, you continue to build the animosity between your players (and their characters) and the Nemesis.

The Never Present Nemesis (NP)

This is the exact opposite of the BFT Nemesis. This is the being who pulls the strings so subtly that we don't know about them until well into the story. They are the manipulators who slowly turn out to be the true power behind the villains and henchmen who have plagued the party. *Professor Moriarty*, in the original *Sherlock Holmes* books, did this for a long time. We discovered he was behind bank heists, abductions, scandals and all manner of things. Once Sherlock discovered him, he still couldn't act against him because he didn't know who Moriarty was. He was just a distant Nemesis who acted from the shadows.

It was only at the end of the campaign that Moriarty and *Sherlock Holmes* came face to face. Conan Doyle made it an epic showdown even though it was just two men struggling at the top of a waterfall. What made it epic was that Sherlock had finally outwitted his Nemesis.

The Never Present Nemesis is the force that does not act directly against the party initially. They have their own schemes in motion and the party accidentally stumbles into them and causes a disturbance. This still doesn't stop the Nemesis or their plans, they merely dispatch villains and henchmen to deal with the characters and don't really care about how it is done.





At first they seemed peaceful...

They have bigger plans. It is only towards the middle of the campaign the NP Nemesis begins to get so irked by the characters continuously thwarting seemingly unconnected plans that the NP starts to act directly against the characters.

This is a really difficult Nemesis to pull off because your 'reveal' plans are much subtler and it relies on your players keeping track of small details and clues that don't seem related. For the first half of the campaign, you can run through your Master Plot, but you present the outcomes with villains and henchmen only who have perhaps a hint here and there that they work for a bigger power. Drug busting movies typically have this type of Nemesis, the mastermind who sits in the back and we only get hints of her or him as time goes by.

Your players need to connect all the dots you have carefully released to them. Wait, the orc chieftain had a sword from the desert people on the other side of the planet. We just stopped a major theft of jewels in the desert kingdom by someone who had an orc necklace. Are the two linked? I love players because they come up with stories that challenge my very universe and one thing that makes my brain tingle is a player who can connect the dots. I've only met a few who do. Most link the desert kingdom to the flying unicorn they saw six adventures ago and the orc chieftain to a snail they stepped on in the mountains. i.e. They don't link anything in a logical way. See Ah ha! Adventures later.

The NP Nemesis will not confront the characters until they – the Nemesis - are sure they will win, and until they are sure the characters are an actual threat.

It is one of those wonderful moments in a campaign where the party suspects Professor Hob, and then they are forced to meet him in a public gathering with no solid evidence. He will play with them, goad them, perhaps entrap them, but all he is doing is testing them. All you are doing as a Game Master is establishing him as a truly evil opponent.

These are the characteristics of a NP Nemesis:

Hidden
Subtle
Cautious
Ordinary
Overconfident

Hidden
Hidden is obvious. They are not in the main picture, they don't have a limelight position for a very important reason – it doesn't advance their cause. They might have a puppet in place who is visible, but who has no power.

Subtle
Subtle is not necessarily in their character. They could be gregarious and loud in public. Subtle here refers to how they act out their plans. And how you must reveal them slowly. The BFT Nemesis must be in their (players) face, the NP Nemesis must never be seen directly. Shadows within shadows.

Cautious
The NP Nemesis is a plotter and a schemer. A manipulator and master chess player. They've worked out how to achieve their goals and are methodical in their very calculated ways of going about doing it. Only once it is in place will they reveal their true nature, once it is too late. This means that you can use that – initial adventures are subtly marked, and as the characters derail the Nemeses plans, those links become more and more obvious.

Ordinary
The NP Nemesis is not a showy public figure – unless that is the guise they are hiding under. *Emperor Palpatine* played that role in the 2000s *Star Wars* films. As *Senator Palpatine* he was very public, but his shadowy actions – literally in shadow – were subtle and hidden. So, unlike the BFT Nemesis who is instantly recognizable as the big bad, the NP Nemesis is not. They are the ordinary, the unlikely to be evil and bad. And yes, we all knew *Palpatine* was evil because films require us to know more than the characters in the film. Our players are the characters and so they should know it.

Overconfident
This is the primary weakness of the NP Nemesis. The BFT Nemesis is just a big, bad brute that needs to be beaten down with a big stick. The NP Nemesis needs to be outmaneuvered. How do the players do that? By relying on the overconfidence of the NP Nemesis. This is a Nemesis who has manipulated the system in the shadows and who is confident no one knows about. The failure of the 2000s *Star Wars* films was that the Nemesis – *Senator Palpatine* – didn't struggle to achieve anything.

He just got what he wanted. The heroes had no interaction with him at all and couldn't have stopped him if they tried. So, there was no sense of accomplishment from anyone, the villain won without difficulty. The heroes lost without a chance of winning because they didn't know what was going on. Imagine if at the end of the first film they discovered *Palpatine* was behind it all, the next films are suddenly this galactic struggle to beat him before things lock irrevocably in place. That would have been a true tragedy and, in my opinion, made for much better films.



I only mention this at length because the NP Nemesis must reveal their hand to the players and their characters – late in the game admittedly, but they must reveal it in time for the characters to stop it. Otherwise you can play the game on your own and pat yourself on your back when your Nemesis wins and then laugh at the stupid characters for not figuring it out, like George did. Don't be like George.

As Gary Gygax wrote in his excellent book *Master of the Game* – the players should feel like there is a 70% chance of failure and only a 30% chance of victory, when in actual fact there is a 30% chance of failure and 70% chance of victory because the Game Master is on the side of the characters and wants them to be victorious.

The Mentor

This is a Nemesis that you must use with extreme caution. If you think the NP Nemesis is tricky, this one is even more so. This is the Nemesis who works from within the party. Although not uncommon in older literature, modern TV shows have resorted to this kind of Nemesis to make their shows contain more 'twists'. The mentor who helps the hero learn their powers and skills and only at the end of season one do they turn out to be the actual Nemesis who has been grooming the hero for some bizarre reason. At this point the Mentor Nemesis becomes a BFT Nemesis. They are known, they have impact, and they have very character specific goals.

Why would you use this type of Nemesis in your game? Perhaps you want to get the players' characters into a story and need a good way to drop massive amounts of data via an NPC.



This NPC becomes trusted by the players and their characters and then the betrayal is so much sweeter. It isn't a bad tactic once or twice. But the risk you run with this kind of a Nemesis is that your players will simply become murder-hoboes and not trust any NPC who appears to want to help them. Be warned, use it once and balance it with an NPC who sacrifices everything to help the characters so the players don't develop a negative attitude to all NPC's.

So how do you do it? How do you play out the Mentor Nemesis? It is a journey and one that you must tread carefully. It requires two major components to work:

Trust
Doubt

They seem so mutually exclusive as to not belong in the same character, right? Except that we as humans ride this tightrope walk every day. Do we trust the government? No! But we trust those who work in it? Yes! No! I don't know! Well this is how it works in the game world – the only way the players will ever accept that this Mentor was an evil bastard from the beginning, and that it is not you as the Game Master who is the evil bastard, is if you establish a line of clues from the get go. But if you establish too many clues and the characters work it out before your planned reveal, then all is wasted and the moment lost.

Trust
The Mentor Nemesis needs to establish trust within the characters' party. They could be helpful, they could supply money, advice, support. You need to show that this person fully supports the party. And indeed, they should do that with all their power – as long as it runs in conjunction with their goals. You will use trust as often as you can, and in greater and greater amounts, as you get closer and closer to your main moment.

You will also use *trust* when the players seem to suspect something. Whenever the characters begin to question the Mentor Nemesis or to investigate the mentor's allegiance, this is your moment to throw in trust. Have the mentor Nemesis sacrifice something.

Remember the Mentor Nemesis will have a major goal that they are trying to achieve and will sacrifice anything to get it. Somehow this goal requires the players' characters to do something on behalf of - or for - the mentor Nemesis first before the Mentor Nemesis can advance. Imagine if *Sauron* had approached *Frodo* and quietly and passionately asked for his help to destroy the Ring, instead of sending horrific Ring-Wraiths after the poor hobbit? If *Sauron* had offered to help the hobbit, had destroyed orcs and trolls on *Frodo's* behalf, obliterated *Gollum*, and generally kept the hobbits safe, and then fought *Shelob* and managed to get wounded in the process, the hobbit would have happily taken the ring to *Mount Doom*. There instead of *Gollum* waiting, an entire army of orcs would be standing ready to scoop up the hobbits, take the ring and toss the Baggins into the flames of the volcano. Neat and easy.

Now, as a reader, if we had no clue *Sauron* was evil and that happened at the end, we would throw the book into the fire for betraying our journey.

A Mentor Nemesis will think nothing of ordering his own men to attack the party so he can save them and prove his loyalty. Use that obsessive nature of nemeses – sacrifice everything for their one goal! So, that is how you make the Mentor Nemesis truly awesome – the players must suspect. The characters must not. If the players suspected, they can be happy when their suspicions are proven right. Everyone likes to be right. Remember that. To do this we need to have doubt.

Doubt in the Mentor Nemesis is your greatest challenge. Players are naturally suspicious of NPC's who offer help. At least, all of the players I've ever gamed with were. You must establish that trust first. Make sure it is solid. Then you begin to add in small acts of betrayal. The party finds the Mentor Nemesis writing a note about their actions. She claims it is a letter to her sister. Later the mentor will introduce a woman who is her sister. Except that the sister acts oddly or is later seen being given coins by the mentor who will again deny wrong-doing and claim she was giving her money for the kids. A few adventures later and the mentor again does something dodgy. They know of an action the characters took against a villain without the characters ever revealing that info.

You must build up the actions that the Mentor Nemesis takes to further their plans in order for the players and their characters to start doubting them but only ever so slightly. It is critical then that you have the Mentor Nemesis Master Plot worked out so that you can logically present doubtful moments to the players that then later fit into the bigger picture.

You are aiming to have at the moment of the Mentor Nemesis betrayal, the players leaning back and going: so, when you sent that note, it wasn't to your sister, it was to the orc war chief! And the money was to buy off the actress who played your sister. You knew about the death pact with the Drow because you were there… watching! You have been doing this all along!

It is a spectacular revelation moment for the players and for you as a cunning and sneaky Great Game Master.



But you need a good plan so you can basically thwart yourself. That is the life of a Game Master.

Remember the Mentor Nemesis is willing to do anything they can to achieve their goal. If there is risk of them being accused, they will burn whatever they can to prove their loyalty. It also means if they need to leave the party to prove their 'innocence' and then get captured and tortured by their own people, they will do it. The TV show *Star Trek Discovery* did this rather well. The Mentor Nemesis acted in bizarre ways fooling us into thinking a certain way. I'd have liked more hints personally but they only had 12 hours to tell the story.

In concluding on the types of Nemesis and how you make each one specific and unique – remember that a Nemesis is forged. They don't just appear. You as the Game Master must construct the Nemesis over time within the game. It is a constant creation and one that you must nurture. The opening adventure is a great place to introduce the Nemesis – be it from the shadows, directly, or as a helpful NPC.

In our campaign that we're making in this book, we have established that the Empress Ilianna will be a Mentor Nemesis. We want the players to go on a journey of discovery, wherein that which appears to be good is bad and what was once thought bad, is good. To establish our theme of "Against Overwhelming Odds" we need to show the players the scale against which they will battle.

That means the characters of the players will start out working for the Empress – a woman trapped by evil magics in a crystal (a lie obviously) who has taken the characters in as champions of her realm.

Or if we want to make it a long play – someone within the court of light has hired the characters for small side quests. Eventually the characters will meet the Empress who will beg them to help her restore order to her beloved Empire by helping her legions wipe out the horrid rebellion. And she will provide them with everything in her power.

This is a careful set-up. The characters must either have lead pampered lives under the dukes or be from out of country. Slowly they discover the horrors of the Empress of light until the Empress has what she wants or realizes the characters are against her. Then she transforms from Mentor Nemesis into BFT Nemesis. The characters and the players now have a wonderful enemy to defeat, but one that they know is incredibly powerful. Overwhelming odds to be overcome.



Sometimes witnesses need to fly, other times they don't.



Desires and Wants

We spoke about your Nemesis needing to have a strong desire or want that they are working towards. But how do you determine what that desire is? And how do you plot out a course for them to get it? In this chapter we look at the want. Plotting the course is the next chapter after the chapter before it. To come up with 'the want' of your Nemesis, it is easier to think in terms of the six fundaments of evil:

Power
Status
Wealth
Revenge
Justification
Love

Before we go further, a psychopathic destroyer of worlds who just wants death and blood might – according to you - glancing over those six points not have any want, just murder, death and destruction.

They do have a want, a very real one but it's not as superficial as you are thinking. A destroyer, someone who wants there to be nothing left, is usually doing so because they feel if there is nothing left, there is nothing that can hurt them, or betray them, or love them.

However, most role-playing games don't go that deep into the psychological aspects of the Nemesis and so your Nemesis would simply be an irrational bloodthirsty maniac with little or no interesting factor other than being a rather flat BFT that cannot be outwitted or out-played, but which must simply be killed. Perhaps that fits your groups' playing style? If so – then excellent! Skip this chapter.

Power

The Nemesis wants power – over something, someone, or for something. The power to create new worlds, destroy old ones, bring balance to the galaxy, rule a kingdom, a planet, whatever. This power could be magical power, knowledge as a power base, or simply physical power of dominion. Commonly this type of Nemesis is obsessed with gaining more power. It is also a power that can never be satisfied. It goes on. Once you rule the planet what about the other planets? What about the other dimensions? There is always more to be gathered.

What this means for the characters and the players is that this is a Nemesis that will only stop if they defeat it. Otherwise it will be ongoing in perpetuity. Furthermore, the scale of destruction gets bigger and bigger as the obsession with more power grows. I have a million slaves doing my bidding? I will burn every last one of them to get a million and five slaves. This is the ultimate 'feed me' monster.

Plots around a power-hungry Nemesis are usually head to head type plots – the characters will seek ways to overcome the Nemesis, usually by beating them at their own game. A big bad who wants physical power might get so huge, so powerful that the heroes can slip in and around the giant physical being, but will ultimately need a bigger, more powerful weapon to slay it. Most superhero stories unfold this way – a powerful Nemesis must be defeated and so the hero must have more inner power, more resilience, more determination, more personal power than the Nemesis. Aligning the hunger for power with your theme is fairly straightforward for this type of Nemesis. They are a physical manifestation of the theme. If it is a theme about war, this Nemesis has more armies, better troops, and more bullets than our heroes. If it is about overcoming overwhelming odds, this is the monster who cannot be killed by normal means.

Big bads who seek knowledge will find that the heroes must find the specific knowledge first, or a component that reverses the power of that knowledge. Only then can they defeat this knowledge seeker. In Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels, *The Colour of Magic* and *The Light Fantastic*, the big bad was after knowledge that only one character had. When that character figured it out, they managed to save the world and defeat the big bad. When creating this type of Nemesis, you need to look at the knowledge that is being sought and align it with your theme. If we take the above two examples of war and overcoming overwhelming odds, knowledge in this case is the power to win a battle without physical conflict. In *Star Wars A New Hope*, one of the themes was discovery of new knowledge to awaken self-empowerment. When Luke discovers the knowledge of the Jedi he can make torpedoes hit small targets. When *Grand Moff Tarkin* refuses to accept knowledge that his belief is wrong, his death star blows up.



Magic or sci-fi solutions are the last manifestation of power. We won't go too much beyond the central theme of *the Lord of the Rings*. As a theme it is everywhere. The power of magic, the lure of it. Resisting it versus embracing it. How is it different from knowledge? Quite simply, the desire for a magical or sci-fi-esque power is focused upon a single outcome.

Once I have the power of magic at my fingertips, I can control everything. Once this technological terror is complete, the galaxy is mine. The Nemesis here isn't necessarily a physically powerful combatant. They are hyper-focused on acquiring the specific magical device/spell. What makes them different from knowledge seekers is that the knowledge seekers aim to use their knowledge for self-gain. They don't really care about power over others. Magic or The Single Unifying Equation is usually used to control Fate or alter one's destiny. It is a fine line, but knowledge is usually internal power, magic is external, mental power.

Status

Often confused with power, status isn't about power although with power it can be achieved. Status is more about recognition, about external admiration and respect. Status may give the Nemesis power – a famous movie star has lots of status and could use that to gain power but, that isn't their goal. They are after more status.

You are the best, the brightest, the most beautiful; *Snow white and the seven dwarves* is exactly about status. Those who have no status – coal mining dwarves with bizarre medical conditions, and a disowned ex-princess threaten the status of a powerful queen who wants the status of Fairest in the Land.

The queen doesn't want power, she can use what power she has to send a huntsmen after Snow White, or turn into a giant dragon.

Status is then a driver for the Nemesis and manifests itself in acts that prove that status. The mad scientist who won't be stopped because she is a genius and will prove it. The magic user capable of controlling dragons will unleash dragons upon the planet just so they can control them in public to achieve that. If you choose status to be your Nemesis want, your master plot should focus on demonstrating your Nemesis's status continuously, and they should only get interested in the party when the party starts to challenge that status.

Status however, unlike power, is finite. Once the Nemesis has achieved being the 'Fairest in the Land' then what? They settle down and become content? No. They look for something else to obtain status in? No. They turn to hunting down anyone who might threaten that status. They become paranoid. That turns the master plot into a much darker story if the characters continue after allowing the Nemesis to achieve their status want.

Or, if your story begins once the Nemesis has achieved that, then the heroes are facing a vindictive, paranoid monster who will stop at nothing to retain their status. Snow White, once crowned queen and married to her prince, is the fairest of them all until some new young thing is born, with better bone structure and a kinder nature. Does Snow White smile and relax knowing the pressure is off her to perform and she can kick kittens again, or does she hire seven deadly, if somewhat over-medicated, assassins to maintain her status?



Wealth

Of the three wants – Power, Status, and Wealth- there are many things in common. Each allows for the other to happen. Lots of money leads to perceived status, and that grants power. High status is often rewarded with money which buys power and so on. Typically, a Nemesis who is after one of the three will have the other two. A mad scientist who wants status must have lots of funds to pay for their experiments, and the power to steal the devices they need.

Unlike infinite power or finite status, wealth is a never-ending want. Wealth, unlike the other *wants*, is special. It comes in two forms; either it is the want of the Nemesis – to steal all the money in the world, or it is the device which enables the Nemesis to do whatever they want and, when they are denied what they want, they become the Nemesis.

For example, a Nemesis who wants money – *Doctor Evil* from the *Austin Powers* movies. One hundred billion dollars is a lot of money. He never talks about what he'd do with it, except perhaps help his son out (a good example of a complex Nemesis). But he wants money. The master plot is how he will get that money.

Cruella De Ville from *101 Dalmatians,* however, has vast sums of money and can do whatever she likes, until she is told she cannot make a coat out of puppy skin (honestly, Disney can be dark sometimes). Then she uses her money to make it happen and gets frustrated when the money doesn't solve her problems.

Money as a want, whether it is obtaining it or using it, has two master plots that head in different directions. The way to decide on which direction is to look at your theme. In the theme of war, getting money becomes a master plot about secret gold reserves being protected or stolen, and about the Nemesis needing the money to fund something to end the war, or keep it going. If the Nemesis has lots of money, why are they involved in a war? Maybe they are manipulating the politics to keep the parties at war because it amuses them? More likely – and also easier for players to grasp – they are funding one side in a bid to gain assets or items or land that they want because they just do.

Until they mixed *Predator* into *The Alien* Franchise movies, is was an excellent example of Wealth as the Nemesis motivator, and one that sadly never concluded. The Nemesis in the quadrilogy is the corporation *Weyland Yutani.* The xenomorphs, the aliens, were all villains or henchmen. *Weyland Yutani Corporation* made it all happen because of greed. Now the films were not trying to tackle the end of civilization because of corporate greed, so Lt. Ripley never got to Weyland and she never managed to set him on fire whilst flushing the airlock. It's a pity.



Revenge

This is a difficult theme – the revenge needs to be unjustified. If the revenge is justified, the players may shift sides and support the Nemesis. *Skeletor* seeking to revenge against He-Man, for twarthing all of Skeletors evil plans is a good example of a revenge story that the players will most likely not side with. A Nemesis who is seeking to destroy a King who annihilated the Nemesis's village, wiped out the entire population and left the Nemesis as the last of his kind, may get the players' characters joining their cause. Not something you wanted perhaps?

Revenge, however, is a fantastic want for your Nemesis. It is a lot of fun to figure out how they will achieve that revenge, and to see how it evolves from getting revenge against the target, to getting revenge against the party. As the characters thwart the Nemesis time and again the Nemesis will shift their focus onto the heroes. Ultimately, revenge is terminal, once the Nemesis has achieved revenge they are done. However, it is typically their fate to be destroyed in the same manner they seek revenge with. If the Nemesis wants their target to burn in fire for all time, the satisfying conclusion is for the Nemesis to immolate themselves.

So, when designing your Master Plot around the revenge want with a war theme, the war could be an expression of the Nemesis getting revenge. I shall ravage your country with war. I shall kill your sons and daughters. I will leave you with nothing. Then I shall kill you. The revenge Master Plot is a complex series of actions designed to slowly cut away at the target. It is never instant death. You must ensure each adventure featuring the Master Plot has a clear demonstration of revenge being enacted and possibly succeeding or failing.

The revenge want is also a little trickier to write because you need to have a solid story attached to the Nemesis in terms of what happened. A Nemesis who wants power or money doesn't need an elaborate backstory. But the revenging Nemesis needs a complete backstory. What happened, why do they perceive it to be a vengence-worthy event?

Justification

This is the evillest of the wants because it is the ultimate expression of a moral dilemma. It doesn't matter who you are: if you can justify it, you will do it. Mass murder on a galactic scale? If it saves the other half of the galaxy then that is OK. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.

It is also one of the more complex wants to run because the players may very well buy into the justification and join the enemy: Join me and together we can rule the galaxy, as father and son, and son's friend, and son's other best friend, and son's other-other best friend, and you too, Bob. You need to make the Nemesis insane in their justification.

If we sacrifice all the unicorns then we will become powerful. I need to be powerful in order to save my kingdom from those good heroes and paladins. A touch extreme but you get the idea. A Nemesis who believes that what they are doing is right and morally justifiable is an enemy who cannot be reasoned with, cannot be stopped, and most certainly will entrench themselves further in their conviction the more the party pushes back. It allows you, as the Game Master, to explore complex social ideas and to present them in a way that allows the party and the players to explore those ideas from multiple sides and to hopefully choose the right one.



This gives us a Nemesis who doesn't believe they are wrong, who doesn't believe they are evil, and who believes they alone are willing to shoulder the burdens of the world to make it a better place, even if no one else will. This type of Nemesis makes for an excellent political game, or one where there are many moral dilemmas. *Thanos* from the *Marvel* movie was a justified Nemesis. He didn't believe what he was doing was wrong, or evil. It was necessary. It wasn't easy for him, either.

Creating this type of Nemesis is a wonderful challenge, as you need to make sure that the reasoning behind the justification is always solid enough to blind the Nemesis to alternatives or to seeing the error of their ways. Typically, characters will overcome the Nemesis through destruction of the Nemesis, but there are times when the Nemesis might see their fault. An excellent example of this is the blindly justified Lieutenant Colonel Nicholson in 'The Bridge over the River Kwai' film – as played by Sir Alec Guinness. He truly believed he was right in helping the enemy build a good bridge. It was only at the last moment that he appeared to realize his justification was wrong. He wasn't an evil man, just a man who believed what he had decided to do was right and was willing to push his men to the edge of death to achieve it.

Love

Abductions, midnight weddings by priests who have a dubious claim to the frock and daring last minute rescues are the traditional Nemesis plots for love. The Nemesis, for whatever, reason is in love with a character and will stop at nothing to get that character into their arms. To quote *Mel Brooks*' from the film *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*:

MAID MARIAN
Yes, but [you can have] only my body. You can never have my heart, my mind, or my soul!

SHERIFF OF ROTTINGHAM
Oh, oh yes! I respect that.

The Nemesis seeks love because supposedly that is the greatest thing to them, and why not? Love is great, after all. It is when the love becomes a symbol for power, acceptance, justification, and recognition that it is a problem. And that is typically what the Nemesis is about.

As I mentioned before, *Anck Su Namun* – the belove of *Imhotep,* the priest from the movie *The Mummy*, is an example where the Nemesis is desperately in love with his very dead girlfriend and will do anything to save her, including killing everything that comes near her tomb. That is a tragic kind of Nemesis where the party may feel compelled to save/help them – hence the writers of the story needing to make Imhotep a murdering psychopath as well.

The other kind of love is the one that is being sought after, but somehow never found because the being seeking it is destructive. *Frankenstein's Monster* is a great example. He wants to love, but ends up destroying or killing those he comes into contact with. Because he can't find love, he finds hate and destruction as an expression and so you end up with this sad and miserable enemy. *The Beast* from *Beauty and the Beast* starts out as the violent, vengeful kind until Stockholm syndrome kicks in and *Belle* falls in love with him.

Love can also be expressed for things – love of gold (supposedly the Dwarven fetish) love of money – that is, just holding onto money out of greed and the joy of its possession.



Most billionaires have this issue. Love for rare and unusual things, collections, items and so on. All can work as a motivator for the Nemesis to do almost anything to get what they want.

Love is an interesting desire for the Nemesis to have, and can be a very good driver, but it comes with the sad disadvantage of being a very old and tired theme. The evil prince who abducts the fair princess to have a secret marriage has been explored. There are a million ways you can turn this on its head of course. And that is one of our goals, so go to it! Get that Master Plot out there!

Armed with the want of your Nemesis, you can now turn to the next step – aligning the Nemesis want with the theme of your Master Plot. If we return to our war theme, and we take revenge, or better yet, justification as our Nemesis's want – their justification could be to win the war at all costs. To that end, they will sacrifice planets worth of people if they believe that it will bring about an end to the war. Another expression of that could be that the Nemesis is the leader of a kingdom and that they believe that their way is the right way and anyone who doesn't believe in democracy should be executed. If your players' characters are all staunch monarchists, there will be conflict, which is our goal as Game Masters. Thus, you align your Nemesis's wants with your theme, your theme with your master plot and you have an excellent starting point.



Villains and Henchmen

But before we leave making awesome nemeses, our villains and henchmen need to go through the same process, but a *lite* version. A single line of text should do it. Furthermore, generally, your villains and henchmen will be the opposite of your Nemesis in terms of wants. A villain for a *Wealth* Nemesis will be a physical power person, or a revenge person. Your theme should still be reflected in their actions and in the expression of those wants, but you need your Nemesis to stick out from the rest of your baddies.

Villains and henchmen have one thing in common that the Nemesis will never have: subservience. They must bow before the Nemesis otherwise, they are destroyed. That gives them an inherent flaw that could be used by smart players. There are four states to subservience in my head:

Desired
Ignorant
Respected
Hated

Without going into too much of the psychology, these four elements can be useful tools for you to keep in the back of your descriptions of your villains and henchmen as they can be great 'get out of jail free' cards.

Desired

This is the traditional Igor – the villain or henchman craves to be told what to do and derives their sense of value from fulfilling their master's commands. They blindly follow orders and will defend their masters to their own deaths, and frequently do. Fanatics, cultists, and professional servants fall into this category.

These help you as the Game Master because they are easy, can't be manipulated, and would rather take cyanide than face jeopardizing their master.



Fire, wooden stakes, and heels - those destroy Vampires.

Ignorant

These are the villains or henchmen who were raised to serve. They don't know anything different, and for them this is life. In the story of *King Arthur, Mordred* never questioned his mother *Morgana* because he was raised to be her champion. A slave who has been elevated to lord of slaves will not think to revolt because that has never been an option. They will merely be the best lord of slaves they can be. For the Game Master, this is a villain who may be turned against the Nemesis if the right options are presented to them by the players' characters. It will take a lot of convincing. They are malleable however and you can allow them to shift if your players need a break in a big battle or solving a problem.

Respected

This is the most dangerous type of villain or henchman. This is the one who respects subservience because they demand it of those who are beneath them. I serve you because one day I shall rise above you, and then you will serve me. It's a fairly neat package all around. This type of villain will stop at nothing to get on top of the heap, so that everyone else must work for them. Now, if the characters try to convince them of an alternative they will baulk at the idea – they believe in their master, and their master's plans. They have to.

Once the master is victorious, they will kill their master and take over. It is only the double-agent play that may work here – where the characters offer to help the villain or henchman get the position they crave. Help us defeat the Nemesis, and we'll install you as the new Nemesis. Just before we cut your head off, type of thing. This is the villain or henchman who will use the captured party to do his own bidding. The party can now "agree to help" and effect an escape from capture - it's a get out of jail free card for your PCs. See what I'm saying in terms of using these four states as tools to help PCs 'get out of a tight spots' without it seeming like you, as the Game Master, was just railroading their success?

Hated

This is the easiest to use want to get your players' characters out of a hole that they're in. The villain or henchman wants revenge on their master, and is willing to do anything it takes to bring them down. They might start as the villain for the adventure, but by the end of it, they have defected and are helping the players' characters. That is an interesting turn of events that makes for a great story and gives you plenty of tools to use to get those characters to go where you need them too.

On the opposite page is the template I use for my various featured bad people. Fill in one of these and you shouldn't have a problem with dialogue, motivation, or actions for your Nemesis, Villain or Henchman. You can go into more detail on many of these but I generally find you don't need much more than this, and what you don't have, you can add as an appendix.

One thing to think about is their emotional states and how they behave when in these various states. This can help if you are not confident at roleplaying to adjust your words, phrases, and tone.

How does the villain act when they are happy/confident? Well, happiness and confidence are usually the same thing for a bad guy. You need to choose the right adjectives to describe how they act. It could be – smug, slimy, nervous, bold, generous, joyous, jovial. There are many more states. By jotting down a word on how they act when happy/confident, you know how to play them when the PCs encounter them.

When they are sad how do they behave? Whispering, gloomy, silent, violent, withdrawn, indifferent, callous – the list goes on.

If they are thwarted by the PC's, and they get frustrated or angry, how do they express themselves? Violent? Shouting? Extreme quiet? Laughing? Calculating? Self-berating?

And finally, when they are in a neutral space – giving out information, meeting the PCs for the first time as an unknown entity, are they open? Cagey? Scared? Aggressive? Domineering? Condescending? I find it a wonderful way to keep my performances of these complex NPCs consistent by having these words to refer to.



NAME

TITLES					
DESIRE					
BLUNT FORCE TRAUMA		NEVER PRESENT		MENTOR	
VILLAIN		HENCHMAN			
DESIRED					
IGNORANT					
RESPECTED					
HATED					
WHAT IS THEIR GOAL?					
DO THEY HAVE ANY OTHER GOALS?					

DESCRIPTIVE CHARACTERISTICS

FACIAL FEATURES	SPEECH PATTERNS	BODY TYPE	EQUIPMENT
SIGHT	SOUND	SMELL	TOUCH
EMOTIONAL STATE	HAPPY	SAD	ANGRY

BIOGRAPHY

NEMESIS, VILLAIN, HENCHMEN SHEET



Gravla was a Never Present villain. She had forces all over the planet that interacted with the party and caused them no end of strife. She was incredibly overconfident, but grew worried about the party's actions as they defeated her allies. The party was smart enough to fool her into thinking they were stuck in a city, when in actuality they were sneaking into her lair.

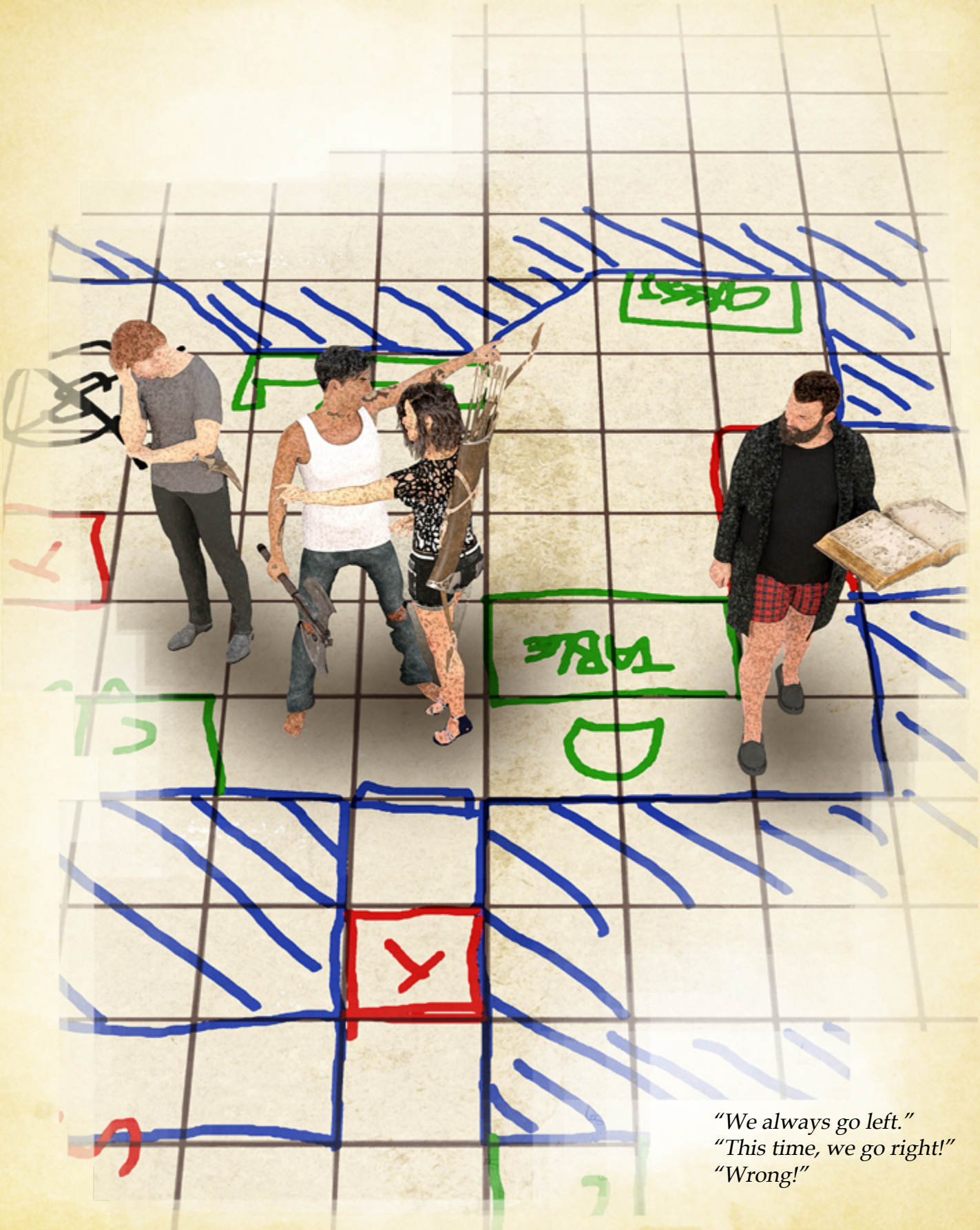
Her goals, her desires, as twisted as they were, were her motivation and she only resorted to physical violence when her mental domination failed, or if she encountered strong resistance. She was a justified villain, as she felt that the Orders had lost their way. And indeed, I made sure she let the players see her justification – one of the players' characters currently no longer trusts the sanctity of the Order as a result of it. As I mentioned in the chapter, Justification is a strong weapon as it can be, if seen in the right light, justified.

The way in which Gravla expressed it, of course, was designed to aggravate, not to gain favour. I'm fairly certain if I'd had her approach the party with 'facts' about the corruption within the Orders, the party would have joined her cause.

That was not my goal, and so I had her kill off as many people and try to kill the party as often as I could, to make sure there was no chance that the party would join her, or see her justification as anything else. Of course, when the party finally killed her, I made sure her minions remained staunch in their faith to her, and made sure to give them a moment to seed more information. My players won, their PCs survived – for the most part - and life has settled down. And as this is merely the opening adventure there is so much more to come.



"We no steal, found stuffs!" Common opening Gygikki line.



"We always go left."
"This time, we go right!"
"Wrong!"

Plotting

Right, the time for us to do some actual work has arrived: we need to plot out our Master Plot and by default the Campaign. Oh boy. Yes, OK – let's have a brief discussion around what constitutes a campaign, in my opinion:

A Campaign, a grand story, is comprised of three core components bundled together by a single element. The components are: **Plot, Setting**, and **Character.** The bundle is how those things come together and that my friend, is **you.**

The plot – that is the purpose of this entire book. The plot is a series of intended events and actions that the Nemeses will take in order to achieve their goal. The plot may adjust according to actions by the players' characters, but always seeks to remain on goal.

The characters – ah, our dear sweet characters. These are the purview of the players - mostly. You have influence here for certain, and if this book helps others I may commit my thoughts on character design and development to paper. Or PDF as is the case today. Characters are also NPCs – and we're dealing with making interesting ones in this book.

The setting - that is a whole different ballgame, and although I've made references to some setting elements here as an expression of theme, designing a world from scratch is a journey in symbolism, imagery, and all the awesomely exciting things that we can do to make an imaginary place real.

We link the characters to the plot and the setting through us – we as Game Masters. Characters are irrelevant without a setting or a plot. A plot without characters isn't a story, it's a sequence of events. A setting without plot or character is a travelogue.

It is your voice, your words, your decisions, your timing that will unite the elements together. Be the fifth element… fourth element.

As a side note, I usually develop my plots, let my players develop their characters and then jointly develop the setting with the players. As we walk into a city of a race that hasn't been encountered yet, or as the player hands a character over who is from a race I haven't thought about or developed much in my setting, I get them to fill in the blanks. To design their own space in the world. I find this can cause some players to invest heavily in the game. Others find it too intimidating. Either way, do you see that it is a harmony of Player and Game Master that wins the day in the end? But I do have a lot of the setting planned before we begin play, just to be clear. Players are adding flavour to the already existing buffet.

Back to our Master Plot and turning it into a campaign. Where do we start? For me, I return to my single sentence of the Nemesis wanting something. What do I do with that? I take it and turn it into a plan. Literally, I work out how is the Nemesis going to achieve their plan? Typically – though not always – the plan for a Nemesis runs along these lines:

Obtaining items/objects/people/concepts/things
Constructing or building something to do something to these things that have been obtained.
Testing this stuff
Doing the thing to get the goal of the Nemesis

Now you fill in the blanks for your Nemesis. In our working example the Empress needs to be resurrected and she needs her dukes to be loyal.



Does that change any of the items in our plan? I don't think so. It doesn't really need to add anything either. We're talking core concept here. To break it down then:

Obtaining stuff
She needs to obtain various relics from around the planet. These relics include items, an innocent virgin man (let's break stereotype) as well as a young woman's body. She also needs a spell from the Book of Yi. You can make it as complex or as simple as you like. A word of warning: making it simple, makes it easy for the characters to fail. The more things needed, the easier it is for the characters to thwart the plans of the Nemesis. If your Nemesis needs only a single ingredient – say a spell from a book – if the characters fail to stop the Nemesis from getting it, then the Nemesis has won. In many films this is often the case. In the *Fifth Element*, one wrong move and the whole universe would have ended. Since role-playing is arguably the longest form of *narrative performance art* we can engage in as humans (how is that for a fancy title?), we must have the most complex solutions for our Nemesis so that our heroes can win, and also to ensure there is enough content to keep them engaged.

Constructing or building something –
A scepter needs to be constructed from the relics and held by the virgin innocent man at the centre of a temple that was built on an exact spot. The Dukes are responsible for building this temple, hence them needing to be loyal.

Testing this stuff –
The idea of transferring her mind from another dimension to the Prime Material is dangerous. Best test it first. Actually, test it a couple of times.

Doing the thing –
Now we can commit the ceremony and life is grand. The climax of the campaign. You need to tie up all plots before the climax!

Why is it important for us to look at the plot from this perspective? It allows you to alter how and what your Nemesis does as the players' characters change the story. If they stop the Empress from getting the spell from the book of Yi – what will she do? Give up? No. Remember, a Nemesis will sacrifice everything to achieve their goals. They will find another source.

It need not be an adventure for the players, but it must happen, and the players must know about it. They come across a city that's been destroyed by demons. Why? They were after a book. Not the Book of Yi, but another book with similar spells. Or assassins and thieves are dispatched to get it back from the PCs.

By knowing the Nemesis's plan, you can adjust on the go, changing and altering the plan as it is affected. Not only does that create a wonderfully dynamic outcome, but it causes your game to be intrinsically a combination of Game Master and Players, not just Game Master.

It now also means that you have less work to do. Watch. You can also look at the plan like this:

Getting stuff
Building stuff
Testing stuff
Realizing goal

We expanded upon the Sentence to uncover our Master Plot. Now we've broken it down into these four steps but still in broad simple sentences. These steps we will break down into smaller steps, which will ultimately, allow us to build back up to our adventures. Big, small, up and down. It works. Trust me...



Getting stuff

We said a relic or two, a book, a man, and a woman. Count with me now… 1..2..3..4..5. If the math is too difficult perhaps you should remain a player? There are 5 adventures waiting for you.

1 – Getting relic 1
2 – Getting relic 2
3 – Getting the Book of Yi
4 – Getting the virgin man
5 – Getting the woman

Was that difficult? I don't think so. What about the second one? Building stuff?

Building stuff

The dukes must build a temple in a specific location and then forge the scepter that the innocent man will hold. 1,2,3, 4.

Yeah – four. This one is a little out the box thinking:

1 – The dukes (we know they are in turmoil. We need to unite them first).
2 – Building supplies
3 – Location finding
4 – Forging the scepter

You could break it down more, but generally I aim for 3 to 5 points per plan phase.

More than that and it starts to become too long. I mean, already we're sitting on 9 adventures. Yes, the number generally reduces as we work through the 4 different stages but you get the picture. Later, when I talk about timing, you will see that a dozen adventures can easily take a year to play. And a good campaign will have double that.

Testing stuff

We use one of the innocent men (we gathered a few) with a scepter (or replacement part, since the PCs have hopefully destroyed the first one). The man goes mad and rampages. During the second test, the man explodes and opens a rift. The third test goes well and some random soul is pulled into existence. You got 3? Good. It's 3. You do need to think broadly here. As we get closer to the end, it is here that you can add in your own style of weirdness that makes your games unique to you.

1 – Rampaging madman
2 – Rift
3 – Wrong soul wrong body

Now please notice I'm not being lazy. I am specifically NOT taking these points further. I'm not breaking down what Rift means. That is another chapter – turning your Master Plot into adventures. We're still creating the master plot. Hold your horses there Jim.

Finally, Realizing goal

The Empress must wait for the perfect time and then the ceremony happens. She returns and must be defeated or claim her throne. The rebels will throw everything they have against her to stop her.

1 – Tying up loose ends
2 – Getting to the end
3 – Rebellion battle climax end

Let us look at those three points quickly:

Tying up loose ends
Hopefully you've run a long game by now and you may have a few lose ends, character stories that need to be wrapped up, side quests that need answers.



This is literally the adventure, or series of adventures depending on how complex your narrative has been, where you show the players a giant sign:

Have you completed all your quests because once you continue beyond this point there is no going back?

How many adventures you have is a product of your seeding, the characters thoroughness and many other factors. Plan for at least one or two adventures here. Make sure to wrap it up.

Getting to the end
You really need to make sure this is a tough battle – not just physically, but mentally as well. The players must have their hardest challenges, face their greatest obstacles, and use everything they have to get through this mission. Think of this as the final big push to get them into the battle with the Nemesis.

Rebellion battle climax end
There is a whole chapter at the end of the book that details how to make this work really well. We talk about the 5 C's. For now, though, this is our epic finale. I've yet to meet many groups who want an adventure after this, where they wrap up their characters – AKA *Lord of the Rings*. I have had groups who are desperate to carry on with a new campaign. In other words, this is it. After this – your Nemesis must be gone. Your PCs must be victorious.

Now a rant: don't tell me that your characters could fail and die at this end and the Nemesis wins. Real life is tough enough without our games of imagination being so bleak too. If the party dies fighting the Nemesis, somehow there must be at least someone who beats the Nemesis. An NPC who has been helping all long.

To simply have the Nemesis win and the players' characters fail at this point is, for me, a blasphemy against their time and effort. Kill off most of them, but let one live who manages to destroy the Nemesis.

However, if you do want to kill off everyone or, as you'd might claim – the dice rolls, the character decisions did it, not you – whatever – be prepared for players who get up and leave and don't return to your table. You'll find players who love it! And think it's awesome. You better stick to those players like glue.

15 Adventures. Each adventure is comprised of 3 acts, so 45 acts. Not bad from a single sentence. And now to my critical point, so pay attention – these are not the only stories. As a matter of fact, this should be about HALF of the total adventures. There should be at least another 20 adventures! That is madness! 15 out of 35 isn't half. I know. I'm bad at math. The other adventures have been created by the players and you don't need to worry about them. Who am I kidding? Of course, you do, but you don't know what they are yet, so wait for the chapter that details Character Adventures and Adventures on the Fly.

Another thing to hold in your noggin is that, just because the PCs have completed the 4th stage of your Master Plot, does not mean that the game is over. It is an excellent ending, and hopefully a spectacular conclusion. We often don't know how to end a campaign – well, now we do. Sometimes though we don't want to, because we're having so much fun. End the campaign, not the world. As the Empress is sucked into oblivion for all time, our heroes turn triumphant. Yay! And for a time, all is happy, until a shadow rises in a distant kingdom.



Now that the Empress is gone, there is a power vacuum, and a dark threat wants to take it all away from the characters. Boom. You just launched another campaign.

Working it out

How did I work out how the Nemesis was going to go about their plan?

I asked practical questions such as 'what is needed?' And more importantly; 'what stuff can I use to complicate the matter?' I could have had the Empress just need a kind word and, bingo, pop back into life. That isn't interesting. That isn't cool. I find it helps to default back to the Who, What, Where, When and Why. I then apply them to each of the elements in the four stages. I do not use the question "How". We save that for later.

Getting stuff
WHAT stuff must be collected?
WHO must be collected?
WHERE is it being kept?

Building stuff
WHERE is it being built?
WHO is building it?

Testing stuff
WHERE is it being tested?
WHEN is it being tested?
WHO is testing it?

Realizing goal
WHERE is it happening?
WHAT is the outcome?
WHO is trying to stop it and WHO is trying to make it happen?

Note each section does not get a full working over. The Getting and Building stuff stages don't need a When. The When is now, or as soon as we have it.

Learning which questions to ask is simply a matter of asking the question and seeing if it helps pop up an interesting adventure idea.

Another tool to use to determine your answers to the four stages is to ask: 'what do we expect?' Expectation is a powerful tool which I've spoken about elsewhere in the book. What do we expect from our single sentence of someone who wants something badly? This is a matter of personal interpretation and intuition, but you should have a fairly solid grasp of the potential answers by simply having watched TV and a few films. The Resurrection of the Empress is a simple tale. We expect a ritual, we expect dark forces. *Ghostbusters* taught us that.

A mad man trying to build an empire, we expect backstabbing, betrayal, harsh war, senseless death and politics. Instead George (*Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* etc.) gave us very little of that. My point here is that we expect outcomes and events and when we are not given them, we don't feel satisfied. We're role-players, damn it. We want a good solid story, which means we want to know how it is going to happen before we start.

We base that on our expectation of the outcome. This is based on our experiences with genre and story. Remember, we only have that one plot, so we kind of know how it plays out already anyway. Use that.

We expect the Empress to be defeated at the end. We expect the dukes to be tough battles, but we expect to beat them. We expect the rebellion to be the Good Guys and to help us win.

What is wrong with that sentence? Nothing. It sounds like an awesome story! Let's go play it.





Voth never lost a battle.

We can then break down that expectation even more into specifics, like the dukes will be fought in different cool locations, the Empress will be in a state of half-in and half-out of the world. We'll have some old, wise woman leading the rebellion. We expect big battles. We expect a romance with the woman who has been selected for sacrifice. We expect the innocent virgin to lose that virginity in a comical scene of love and passion to an Ewok - OK, maybe we didn't expect that last bit.

And yes, there is my second point. We can use expectation to give our players what they want, and then deliver it in a bizarre way. That surprise is fun. And if you think about it, that is what our players are doing to us every time we play the game. They are constantly turning out solutions that are out of this world. As Game Masters, hopefully that is part of what you love about the game.

We have now plotted out our Master Plot into 15 adventures. We now need to create those adventures in broad-strokes. Always broad-strokes. Why? Because the players will make decisions that may cause those adventures to become redundant or irrelevant. And we need the agility of mind and the lack of constraint to be able to change. Besides, it will be a huge waste of our time to do it for all the adventures – what if the players stop playing?

NAME

PHASE	NO.	SIMPLE DESCRIPTION - WHO, WHAT, WHERE, HOW
GETTING STUFF	1	
	2	
	3	
	4	
BUILDING STUFF	1	
	2	
	3	
	4	
TESTING STUFF	1	
	2	
	3	
	4	
REALIZING GOAL	1	
	2	
	3	

MASTER PLOT ADVENTURE OUTLINES DATE

Master Plot Adventure Outline

Remember you are just jotting down the objectives that need to be completed in order for the Nemesis to achieve their Want. Make sure you cover all the possible adventures you can think of that relate directly to the Master Plot. Do not include other adventures that are not related to the Master Plot. Those are fun, bonus adventures and should be plotted like a standard adventure.

Just as a footnote to this chapter – you can absolutely throw in additional adventures that have nothing to do with the Master Plot. These can quite literally be because you were inspired by a TV show, read a good module, or had a dream that was just a fun and cool adventure. Those, like I said, get plotted as a regular adventure and shouldn't have anything to do with the Master Plot.

This isn't an example from an online game I ran, but from an offline one. Forgive me, but my online games are currently still in progress and I'd hate my players to read this and find out all kinds of spoilers.



It would ruin the fun for them.

I ran a game where my end goal was to have my players' characters become Gods. The Nemesis in the game was a horrific deity known as Geshuul – God of Oblivion. He wanted to annihilate everything and bring about nothing. I wrote and delivered a horrid opening for the game – it was a play that the PCs were watching in their little village that spoke about these gods locked in combat. I tried to be three different actors. It did not work as I would have liked. Anyway, Geshuul had a plan: to help the characters gain enough power to finally destroy his enemies – the other gods.

He needed to build up the characters – that was his building phase. He then needed to ensure they were involved in various god quests. He needed them to change the gods. In one adventure the players used a wish spell – were sent back in time – and met the physical incarnation of one of Geshuul's greatest enemies, Brax. The problem was, this was so far in the past, Brax was an impressionable 9-year-old and hadn't yet ascended to god-hood. The PCs interactions made him less militant and more peaceful, allowing Geshuul to dominate.

Then he needed to test the characters and so gave them access to destroying various smaller gods, one notable one being the God of Colour – plunging the world into black and white. Undaunted, the players carried on. One of them caught on to the pattern and in a wonderful twist that even I had not seen, manoeuvred his way into becoming a god – yay – but in destroying Geshuul – yay – and all the other gods, he installed himself as the one true god of the world.

Ironically, he was playing a Paladin.

Now, what I'd done here was to make sure that each of the characters had a religious link to the deities. One player had not written much of a bio/backstory – merely that she'd (the PC) been found next to a wagon with everyone dead, including her parents, she was covered in blood and holding a great, ancient axe. That isn't much to work with, but it was great for me. So, her backstory – which we discovered over time – was that she was the Princess of Hell. Direct heir to the throne. Her father, the God Repht and Lord of Hell, was ill. Her mother – a mortal – had tried to hide her away. Later on, she'd become the Lord of Hell and help the paladin destroy all the other gods.

Another player had simply mentioned his character had stolen something in his past and was now on the run. Bingo – he'd stolen a magical weapon that could kill gods. When he found that out, he tried to avoid killing gods at all costs. Yeah, that turned out well.

So, my planning for the campaign was plotting out Geshuul's goals and how he was going to get the party to help him, but also plotting out how he'd make mistakes – arrogant ones – that would lead the party to realizing he was the bad guy. I made sure the party had the equipment and abilities to ultimately defeat him. I did not intend for them to defeat them all. It was a wonderful outcome.




The Vax abduct anyone they can find, from any planet. Food is food...

Designing adventures

You have your epic Master Plot, and you've identified in bold statements each of the Master Plot Adventures you need in order to make the plot come alive. How then do you take those broad strokes and turn them into finely detailed and epic adventures? Read a book that tells you how. This one won't. Or will it? It might. If you show it love and respect. What am I going on about? I'm proving some points. One, I'm proving that skipping waffling authors can sometimes cause you to have to reread the sentence. Two, I am using the set-up, denial and then supply principal that we're going to make use of in our adventures quite heavily.

Set-up, denial and then supply is the stock standard method of getting people to like the outcome. Not you, but the outcome. Why? People like it when they have to fight for something to get it and then get it. They also don't know what they want until you tell them they can't have something. Then they decide that is what they want. So, by denying them something you create a desire that you can then supply. Drugs are a great example. Do what drugs do. Offer an escape from reality, be difficult to obtain (kind of), and then supply the escape that you promised. Except more is needed for the next escape. So, the difficulty becomes in obtaining more, and more and more… don't do drugs! Please! I don't do drugs because I'm clearly on a different planet already.

I think I've made my point. Set-up, deny, supply. Mmmm… that looks suspicious doesn't it? Kind of like… Act 1, Act 2, and Act 3? Where the hell is that from? Oh, yes – international story telling standards authority, circa 3094 BC.

The 3-act structure that we know today, has been around since at least the early part of the 20th century in the form of film and later television. By default, you must assume your players watch movies and television, unless you play in a very special place. As a result, they know all about structure based on the 3-act model. I, however, like to remind myself in more practical terms so I call them the 121 and 122 methods.

Types of Adventures

Isn't this supposed to be a sub-chapter? Shut-it, who is writing this book anyway? Right. So, before we get into how to use the 121 or the 122 methods, we need to know this – there are four broad types of adventures we can send our players on:

Thwarting
Delivering
Collecting
Discovering

"Thwarting" adventures are ones where we give the characters a clear goal to go and thwart. Usually this means kill or destroy, but sometimes it means arrest or render useless. Essentially a Thwarting mission is easy to create – set-up what needs to be thwarted, make it difficult to get to the thwartee, and then make the thwartee difficult to thwart. Got it? Watch this.

"Delivering" adventures are classic tales of characters being given something or someone to deliver to somewhere and then having a hard time doing it. Once they get there they usually realize it shouldn't have been delivered and so fight to keep that which they needed to deliver.



"Collecting" missions differ because, in Delivery missions, the PCs need to deal with the object or person along the way to the drop-off point. True, collecting missions also could contain that element - the disruptive collected element - however the objective of a collection mission is to collect. Delivering it back to owner is a second adventure that get's it's own treatment, monsters and encounters.

"Discovering" is a mission for characters to go somewhere and find something and then do something with it. Notice how similar they all are?

Here/there is something (introduction) that must go/come/end (adventure) over there/here (conclusion). The nuance is in the events that happen along the way. Each of these different adventures comes with expectations. Damn it, expectations pop up everywhere. These expectations, as before, free you up from the burden of having to think through each and every moment by offering you a wide variety of solutions, which you can pick and choose from.

STOP! DO NOT GET CONFUSED.

You have your Master Plot and the adventure outlines for that. Those are completely, totally and utterly separate from the plots of the adventures that make up the Master Plot. It is critical to understand this. The Master Plot will tick onwards and forwards regardless of what the characters or the players do – you know what I mean – it will adjust, but will carry on. The plot points of an adventure will generally also do this but are usually much more contingent on the players choices. To use an allegory: a Master Plot is like a solar system. It notes the star, the planets and maybe the moons that orbit it. It describes things like big balls – that orbit a bright yellow star.

An Adventure Plot might be the crazy adventure on Earth that gets the characters into a spaceship by fleeing from 20 aliens, driving a tank, and blowing up New York. The only link between the two is that the adventure is set on Earth and Earth is in the master plot as *planet of rock and water that gets invaded*.

Right, back to the whole point of this chapter – creating the adventure. So, we have 4 adventure types to choose from, and we have these 121 and 122 methods. How do we fit that into the Master plot? Well, back to the acts…what? I haven't told you what the 121 and 122 methods are yet? Blast. OK, well here goes -

So, there are the 3 acts in a typical 3 act plot– simply put they are:

Act 1 – introduction and set-up – set-up
Act 2 – the main plot and story unfolds - denial
Act 3 – the conclusion of the story and the end of the plot - supply

But before we do, we need to break it down a little more so that we can inject a sense of drama into the whole thing and legitimately make our players feel as if they've been in the middle of a fantastic story.

Act 1

In Act 1 we must introduce the status quo – what is the normal right now? Don't get me wrong, the normal right now might be the end of the world, a volcano destroying everyone, a plague has set in. The normal right now simply refers to the current state. We expect the current state to change as the players' characters interact with the world. But we must establish the status quo.



We also need to introduce the characters. I'm talking here about NPCs, villains, henchmen, Nemesis (if she or he is that kind of Nemesis). We'll talk later on how to do this, but we must give our players a heads-up on who they will be dealing with, now and in the future.

Then we need to introduce the plot – this is the critical moment where the players either decide their characters will take the plot-hook (later, calm down) or not.

Nevertheless, in Act 1 you must introduce your players to the plot of this particular adventure. And, critically, they must decide to start it. That is all, really. End of Act 1. Simple. Ha! Said no Game Master ever.

You can work out which is done first in Act 1, it doesn't matter. You're establishing the setting and so order is a tool you can use depending on your players. We can break that down more a bit later, if you remind me. Anyway, the players and their characters bite and start along the plot.

Act 2

Act 2 is broken into two different phases and they cannot happen in any other order than the set-up and the first attempt. You cannot run it in any other order. It just doesn't make sense. Go ahead and challenge it. Try the other way around…

Set-Up

The characters have now decided they are going to follow the plot and so head off into the forest, dungeon, nebula, whatever. The set-up is now in play and you can milk it for all your Game Masterly worth. So, the set-up continues – this is the journey to the point, the discovery of the threads, the information dumping, the NPC introduction.



All the elements that will allow the players to get to the First Attempt. It doesn't matter what the Set-Up components are, the players will need to be given enough information that they can choose a course of action.

So often players will sit back and lament that they do not know what to do next. This is often because they didn't focus and pay attention during the set-up part of Act 2, and sometimes this is because the Game Master skipped this phase or didn't give enough information during this phase. Either way, it is corrected by simply introducing an NPC or situation to give more set-up information and guide the players back onto a path of decision making.

The First Attempt is where the characters now get to enact their plan, take action, or move forward and no longer need information or set-up. It is also critical that they should think they can win. Or at least, feel they have all the information needed to be able to do so. They face off against a few tough opponents, find the location of the hidden treasure or steal the starship. At the end of the First Attempt they realize that they only had half of the picture, the power and the information they needed and now the villain, henchmen or Nemesis is going to triumph. They must make a mad scramble to change their course and intercept before it is too late.

That neatly leads us into Act 3.

Act 3

With their new goal at hand the characters now seek to confront or overcome their adversary and claim victory. How this plays out is entirely up to you. If we are using a 121 method, when they slay/defeat/change the object of the plot, the adventure ends with everyone at the bar having a drink. Nice and neat.

121 and 122

Now, if we look at that we can then simply apply this formula to the acts:

121 is:
1 session for Act 1
2 sessions for Act 2
1 session for Act 3

122 is:
1 session for Act 1
2 sessions for Act 2
2 sessions for Act 3

The second session for Act 3 is a false ending and a true ending. They are quite simply:

False Ending
A false ending is where the characters face off against the opposition, think they have beaten it, and just as they turn away to head home happy, they discover there was more to it and that true evil is about to triumph. That, then, takes them into the true ending.

True Ending
The characters now face off and hopefully defeat the enemy/opposition and now truly achieve an ending to the adventure.

OK, so that's great. How do we use this in our game? By knowing this and learning these two structures, you can choose what needs to happen next based on where you are within the structure during an adventure. Let us say the PCs have headed out into the swamps to look for the little girl who was lost out there. You are now firmly in Act 2 set-up. You are not going to have the villain or the Nemesis attack the party now and have a spectacular showdown – you have plenty of time and need to establish and set-up more information first. You can explore the swamps with the characters,



Some warriors never rest...

adding in NPCs to talk about seeing the girl, lizardfolk who are initially aggressive but will deal information for horsemeat, and so on. Quicksand can feature, poisonous vines, whatever you like.

You know that the First Attempt is next and if you haven't planned for it, you can do so whilst the players' characters struggle through the swamp. If you want the first attempt to be in a crumbling swamp ruin, in the set-up you can talk about bits of old building, the lizard folk, and whisper about the *dead place*, and so on. The First Attempt then happens, and again we know the characters are not going to face the Nemesis or main villain in a meaningful combat, they need to get to a place where they are going to do that first. Now you can have fun exploring the ruins.

In other words, if you know the structure you have an anchor point from which to springboard the next encounter or event and you can do so with the knowledge that it will fit within the bigger plot and not screw it up. Your players have a tough time keeping track of their wounds and how many rounds of ammunition they have left, let alone complex narrative clues. So, keep things clean and neat. Don't try to have Act 1 bits from another adventure floating around in Act 2 of this current adventure. Don't allow yourself to get indulgent and show off your mastery of plot by overly complicating it either.

You've read this book, we know you're going to be a great Game Master – do not let the power go to your head! Use simple plots to begin with. You can complicate them later, once you know how to do it. Having said that, Seeding is a very powerful narrative weapon that you'll learn to master if you read that chapter elsewhere in the book.

The bottom line is, what we are creating by using classical stage play writing and script writing techniques is a place where you, as the Game Master, are in total control of your plot progression at all points. The players and their characters are responsible for the story. You can't be expected to do everything.

To recap those structures:

121

Act 1 – Establish the norm, the people, the situation and let the players move forward.
Act 2 – Set-Up the adventure journey First Attempt at solving the situation
Act 3 - True Ending – wrap up and go home.

122

Act 1 – Establish the norm, the people, the situation and let the players move forward.
Act 2 – Set-Up the adventure journey
First Attempt at solving the situation
Act 3 -False Ending – there is more than just this ending
Final showdown – here is the final ending, go home.

We can now twist up how we play each of the acts. Arguably the easiest act is Act 2. It's just the meat of the plot and the 'fun' stuff. Act 1 is the most complex to pull off, because if you have difficult players they will screw around with you. Act 3 is the most demanding because it needs to feel like a really awesome ending and not just some dull, anticlimactic pile of droppings.



So how do we do it?

Act 1 – we need to set up the plot to kick off the story. We need to set up some NPCs, and we need to establish the big bad for the adventure.

So many components. We also need to hook the characters into the adventure. And by characters, I mean players. Let us be honest, the characters don't choose jack, the players do. So, let us start there.

How to involve players in your adventure?

Start by identifying your players – are they story hungry or are they self-actualization hungry? Maybe they just want to kill stuff? Do they take your plot hooks or do they make their own? Players who bite at plot-hooks easily and enjoy the story are easy to work with. The challenge they present is about ensuring that your Master Plot pays off at the end in a satisfying way. Call these kinds of players **Follow Plotters**.

Players who prefer to tell their own story, and so actively avoid plot-hooks, are a little more difficult. They need to be worked into the plot in a different way – generally you need to punch them in the jewels, slap them across the face, and insult their choice of pizza topping. You need to make it personal. I say we call them **Make Plotters.**

Players who just want to kill stuff, or who don't care about a story and just like moving from scenario to scenario, are a different type of player – in my mind – they are tactical glory monkeys who only care about the mathematics of the game. Call them... when we head to the movies. Or ask them to drop off pizza. I guess I am being mean...

Your plot should be straight-forward, and your adventures should point in a singular direction. You can still use the 121 method and most of the ideas in this book to full effect, you just don't need to be subtle about it. I think we can call them **Table Top war-gamers** and let them do their own thing.

So, I'm only going to focus on the two types of players I like to play with – the Follow plotter and the Make plotter kind.

Side note – we live in the age of near-instant global communication. I have converted. Truly. Look at my YouTube channel, there is a video on why I hate online roleplaying. A few months later, and some awesome roleplayers showing me the error of my ways, and I released an apology video. Two years later and now I almost, almost prefer online games. What I mean to say is – don't be afraid of playing the games you like to play and looking for players who fit that.

Follow Plotters

These players love a good story. It can be wonderfully complex and rich with their character stories woven into it to generate a really good narrative. Your plot must be robust and solid, and you should follow the guidelines in this book, as your players will be expecting them.

Act 1 is then about teasing them with the potential plots that could come from it, and letting their imaginations do the rest. When you introduce an NPC, you can have them stumble in from the mist. Let them beg for help, but not say from what. Follow Plotters love a good story and that means solving the plot.



Introduce the villain or henchman in dramatic ways, keep it Michael Bay-esque (famous for over-the-top explosions in movies) – big colourful descriptions and lots of areas for them to explore and follow. Do not give Follow Plotters huge amounts of normal. Each NPC they meet should have rumours and whispers of things going on. The more you can seed the better. Follow Plotters are a joy to run through Act 1 because they are eager to move forward onto Act 2. Act 1 should play out in a single session of 3 hours or so.

Act 2 is where you can throw in as much as you like, but pace yourself. Do not overdo it. This is not a campaign – just part of the adventure. I'd suggest maybe 2 sessions at most. You have two sections to work through, so that can give you a sense of the timing. If you spend 4 sessions on Act 2 alone you will be slowing things down horribly and it will feel like a *Peter Jackson* trilogy. Remember, your players are enjoying following the story, but they want that story to end too.

Act 3 should be mixed, sometimes go with a 121 and sometimes a 122 to keep the Follow Plotters eager for more. If you sense the players getting a little bored with the plot, finish up quickly and dramatically.

Things to keep in mind for Follow Plotters:

They like a good plot and expect the adventure to be well planned and thought out.

They may know the structure, but it is how you reveal it that they care about.

The formula works and everyone understands it.

Make Plotters

These players are there because they have a character that they want to play and are eager to see how that character acts and behaves. These are, by far, the more challenging player to bring into your adventures because they make their own. Your role is to be the simulationist, and your plots are not their concern. Is your Master Plot ruined? No, not at all. In fact, it can be made stronger because of this type of play. You just need to be a little more delicate.

Act 1 is now about the players telling you the status quo and you supporting that. The players want their characters to explore some old ruins but may also want to head to the villages of the elves to find out about the one character's mother. They won't give a fig about your blacksmith who has had his silver hammer stolen. Forget hooking these players in this way. You must go for the throat. Attack the party with bandits who head to a cave that has your plot waiting inside it.

They refuse to head north? You are a god in your universe – swap the poles. Literally move the Tower of Evil from the north to the west. Unless it has been established by the players' characters going there before, who is to say that there isn't a tower in the west, or which-ever direction the players wanted to go? Flexibility is the key to dealing with Make Plotters. So, your Act 1 is about having your plot plan, and then working the angle so that you get all your stuff introduced into the personal stories of the players' characters. Then you have to make it personal. Seeding is a remarkably powerful tool and will help you. OK! Fine! Go read the damned chapter on Seeding if you are so eager. Just come back when you're ready, because there is more! I swear! Just look at how many pages to the next chapter!



Act 2 is a delicate balancing act for the Make Plotters. They are liable to retreat, turn away, or completely ignore it. What if they sense you are giving them a plot and they violently react to it by befriending the orcs who you have set-up to be the henchmen of evil in this adventure? You need to be quick, look at your plot notes, and realize you are in the set-up phase. You have the whole first attempt to correct the track.

And you can correct any narrative. Only planned to have one space battle? Who says there wasn't a second, bigger assault. Oh, you thought those were the henchmen orcs? No, those were just the vanguard. The real troops arrive later. Make Plotters don't want to feel that you are controlling their story. They want to feel that the world is happening regardless of their actions, and that their actions determine their own plots.

I must put my foot down and say – yeah, think the players are responsible for the plot? Autobiographies are edited and retold to be interesting by editors all the time. The forty years of boring are compressed into a 2-line sentence. There is always a time element to the narratives we read. When there isn't, and they become rambling monstrous tomes of babble, we tend not to read them. Watched *Laurence of Arabia* recently? Me neither. 6 hours of watching a man on a camel in the desert is dull.

The same goes for players who feel they drive the story and the plot. They drive the story; their decisions make that happen. But it is our responsibility as Game Masters to drive the plot – otherwise there is no direction and, more importantly, no time-frame. If the world were to play out without time it would be very different. We are that element in the game. We choose when things happen. We choose the outcome of events – when dice cannot, and even when dice do, we are the interpreters.

So, we are ultimately responsible for driving forward. To where? To our plot. And when we get there? We'll drive to another plot, and another, until we die of old age.

Rant over. For now.

Act 3 for the Make Plotters should be kept short and out of their way. 121 is your best solution for Make Plotters. They might have been hooked into your plot, but now they want to return to their own story. Let them go. It is easier.

Of course, it goes without saying that if you read the backstories of the characters and develop plots around those, there will be much more investment from the players than just a random call for help will ever achieve. This goes for both types of players. And yes, although I say we plot the campaign, the players make the story. It is a balance, but one that must be there – otherwise we're just rule interpreters and scenario delivery people. I will not accept that my job at the table is to be that. Never. Now the rant is over. So is the chapter. You believed me. By now I'd expect more.

Practical solutions

So, you've got a broad plan of your action. But how did we get to the adventure plan in the first place? This book is so backwards. I'm sorry. There is so much that needs to be in it, and not enough dimensions for the pages to sit in the right order. Hence me plodding away in such a linear fashion.

How do we do it? Well, we can now use the tools, the understanding into our players, and the methods described above to methodically, calmly, and rationally develop the adventure outlines into working adventure modules.



Let us say that you're working on the adventure for the middle of the Master Plot – the building of an item. Your theme is *liberation of the oppressed*. The characters have recently had a Collect adventure.

Thus, you are eager to give them something else. You have a sense of humour and so you decide that you are going to have them deliver something of value to the very lair where the dark lord (Nemesis) is constructing his alter of human sacrifice to allow demons to enter into the prime material plane (Master Plot). So, by just looking at which of the four types of adventures, you are going to offer you already have it easy.

We know the characters need to find a building because the Master Plot says so. We know that they should take something or someone somewhere because the type of adventure says so. Now all we need are the details. We also have decided on a 121 method because 122 was used in the last one. So easy.

Do we need a single sentence to drive this plot home to bed? Do I need to stop adding in useless sentences? We pick a villain for this. It could be a henchman. Actually, let us use henchmen. They never get their own plots. The henchmen must be building something in this adventure that is part of the item being built in the Master Plot. Well, we need a place to house the demons, right? So why not that? What difficulty would you have in building a demon-housing structure?

Let us explore what we expect from demons, and what we expect from construction sites. Demons traditionally live in the nine hells where there is lava and heat. So, you need lava. Ergo, we need to build a demon house on a volcano. Volcanoes offer issues. Sulphur pits. Poisonous fumes.

The cube was glowing, just another day on the job...



Perhaps the henchmen don't like working under those conditions – they're just henchmen of the big bad or of the local villain. They need protection from these conditions. Or something to help them cope. Well bingo, that's what the PCs have to deliver.

Whatever it is that the henchmen need. The henchmen need a way to cope with the infernal heat of the construction zone and hopefully are not going to have difficulty getting the means to do so delivered to them. We are relying on the PC's to be the difficulty in the sentence. So, we need to make sure the PC's become a difficulty.

The theme is *liberation of the oppressed*. So, perhaps there are these small, blue, furry mammals who are kept in dark cages packed in ice. They shiver and barely exist in this form. The PCs are paid to deliver these to a certain place near a largo volcano. No questions. And don't let the creatures warm up. If they do they become the cutest, bubbliest, most wonderfully friendly little puppies in the world. Seriously. I said you had a sense of humour. So, do I! The PCs will assume these friendly little things will become gremlins or turn into a giant demon or whatever it is that the paranoid minds of players conjure up. I just want them cute. Little licks of pink tongues. Curling up in arms and under cloaks, cooing or purring contentedly. Pushing bits of meat near the fire with tips of noses. Burping when fed. I want the PCs to be absolutely in love with these little guys.

That way, when they arrive at the drop off, they see the little critters being packed in ice by the henchmen who will casually tell the PCs that they drop the critters into the lava and for about three or four hours the critters absorb the heat. Then explode. Hence needing cart loads. Cue player wrath and smack-down on the henchmen.

I am also not stupid – much – so when the players destroy the temple, the furballs will elect to stay near the volcano, except for one who will befriend one of the PCs (if they want it). I now have a wonderfully useless pet for a PC who will love it, adore it, and save it from a villain, in a few adventures time.

Now we plug the scenario into the 121 method:

Act 1

Establish the norm, the people, the situation and let the players move forward.

PCs come across a wagon being attacked by goblins. Wagon driver is wounded, but begs the PCs to deliver the cargo to a nearby wooded region. (A little combat never goes wrong.)

Besides, I need a possible goblin stow-away for later. Furthermore, if the party saves the wagon driver there is a certain amount of responsibility that they've taken on, so it helps with those Make Plotters who refuse to take hooks.

Even if they help the goblins, will they really leave the ice pets behind? So, I have a back-door if they avoid my plot hook – the henchmen will now come looking for their ice-balls.



Act 2

Set-Up for the adventure journey The party must stop for the night, as the horses are tired. If they haven't yet opened a crate to see what is on the wagon, my goblin stow-away will try to steal a box. The box is dropped and reveals a cute and furry creature. Insert a bonding montage with the little guys.

If the party opened a box – there was never a goblin stow-away. We don't need it to instigate the discovery of the furballs.

If the party needs some action and a solid hint at what is happening in the volcano, I could throw some fire Mephitis or demons at the party. They are supervising the construction and saw the party as a bit of fun.

First Attempt at solving the situation is the journey to the drop off point – more cuteness and fluffiness.

Henchmen arrive and ask to take delivery. Inform PCs about the grizzly fate of the creatures. (I need a name for these things: Cutijin - coming from the word Cute and Jin being Japanese for people, move countries and learn stuff people). PCs either hand over the Cutijin and get paid and leave, or they resist and a combat ensues. How does that play out?

The mother of the Cutijin should sniff out the PCs and ask some serious questions (assuming they hand the Cutijin's over) pushing the PCs back into the adventure. If they just attack the henchmen, some must die (reward the PCs) but some henchmen have some magic that lets them teleport away, or summon some giant demons who really are too big for the PCs to handle. One Cutijin will sacrifice itself and destroy a demon – giving the players hope, before they must retreat. Ultimately though, the PCs are back on our plot.

Act 3

True Ending – wrap up and go home. Naturally this is a major conflict between the henchmen, a giant lava demon (was there any doubt?) and the PCs. The Cutijin can sacrifice themselves to destroy the lava demon, if you are truly sadistic, and if the PCs cannot defeat it on their own. The PCs learn of the purpose of the temple – as that was the entire need of the adventure, remember?

Are we done? No, not really. But we're done enough that we could play using this. All you need do now is go back into the three acts and refine the details. Maybe the wagon turns into a high-speed wagon chase with the PCs saving the wagon and the driver on a dangerous mountain pass (hinting at the volcano to come). You can work the tracking or survival skills and challenges you will throw into the forest journey component of Act 2.

If you are truly impressive you could write a song about Cutijin for the bard in the party to recall. I also jot down at least 10 random names for the Henchmen to have.



Oh! Work out a few clues as to your Master Plot. Are the symbols of the Dark Lord etched into the as-yet-to-be-laid keystone, perhaps a blueprint on human skin that shows the henchmen how to build the temple? Let your theme in visually, metaphorically, technically and drop a few hints here and there.

Next!

You can also test the strength of your adventure by asking:

What do our players need to know at the end of the adventure?

If you have not provided them with ample – three, four, or five - direct clues as to being able to answer your question, then you need to go back and make sure to put it in there. Now you are ready to run it.

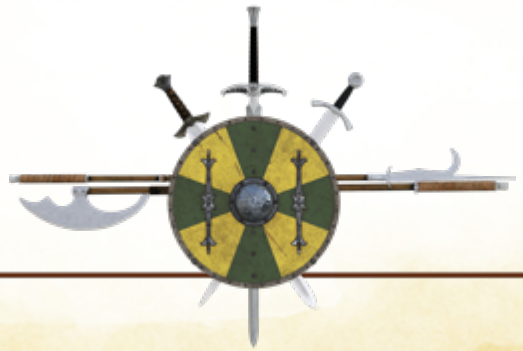
Feel free to explore the Emergent adventure – I haven't spoken about them yet, but they're essentially adventures you cannot plan on as a Game Master, because they pop up as a result of player choice. Emergent adventures are the players deciding to inhabit the temple rather than destroy it. Or deciding that blowing up the temple requires more explosives than your planned one liner of "so you destroy the temple." Players have a wonderful ability to create a story.

Often, they make decisions based on information you supplied, but in a curious way. Emergent Adventures are like Adventures on the Fly except they link in from a Master Plot adventure. This means you need to ensure that there is still a good dose of Master Plot revelation in these adventures, unlike Adventures on the Fly or Character Adventures that do not need a Master Plot link.

Once it (the adventure) is run and everyone is happy with treasure and Cutijin droppings in their backpacks, you can ask the players (obviously at the end of the session) a question to make sure they're still on track.

What do they think is going to happen next?

Hopefully, they give you a dearth (love that word) of answers. Hopefully, one or two will reference screwing over the Nemesis by destroying his temple. Some might even pick up that the Dark Lord is planning on housing a lot of demons for quite some time. If none of them get these points you need to repeat the adventure. Not literally, but figure out another temple being built somewhere else. Use a different adventure type to get the PCs there, but make sure they know the Nemesis is building homes for demons.



NAME

OBJECTIVE									
THEME									
MASTER PLOT		CHARACTER PLOT		OTHER					
NEMESIS		VILLAIN		HENCHMEN					
TYPE OF ADVENTURE	THWARTING	DELIVERING	COLLECTING	DISCOVERING					
WHAT DO WE EXPECT?									
121		122							
WHAT MUST THE PLAYERS LEARN?									
ACT I	DESCRIPTION - WHAT DO WE EXPECT AND HOW IS YOURS DIFFERENT?								
INTRO GOAL									
INTRO ENEMY									
INTRO SITUATION									
ACT II									
SET-UP JOURNEY									
FIRST ATTEMPT									
ACT III									
FALSE ENDING									
FINAL SHOWDOWN									
LIST 10 NAMES									
WHAT DID YOU SEED?									
HOW DOES THE OUTCOME CHANGE YOUR MASTER PLOT?									

ADVENTURE TEMPLATE

DATE



This template is fairly self-explanatory. Notice that the Objective is right at the top – what is the objective of the adventure or mission? Discover information? Defeat a monster? Save the town? Work out the reason for the adventure. If there isn't a reason for it to be there – then why have it? "Because it's cool" is a great reason, if this is an "Other" adventure. If this is a Master Plot or character adventure then that really doesn't cut it. It must function to advance the plot, help the character learn or grow for example.

Simply tick the Nemesis, villain, or henchmen box. This just reminds you which characters will be involved and the scale of the adventure. Typically, Henchmen adventures are shorter than villain or Nemesis missions.

Tick what type of adventure it is. Then list what we expect from that type, and how you plan on changing that up.

Is it a 121 or a 122 mission? I intentionally include this here to force myself to remember two different methods and consciously choose which one to go with.

Another critical box – what the players must know at the end; I have to make sure they know this, and I need to ask if they do throughout the adventure, otherwise the adventure is a failure. This is more critical for Master Plot Adventures than the other two, but can still be a great guiding light for them.

Now you populate the acts, remembering to challenge yourself. These are not long sentences unless you want them to be. You can include notes and references if you want. Below I have a breakdown sheet, if you really need one to flesh out each stage of the act.

There is a names list – so that you are forced to create these names before you begin. You will thank yourself later! What did you seed? Any critical names or locations? Just jot down as you go.

How does the outcome affect your Master Plot? If this was a Master Plot outcome, having a note here is vital. You may just drop a single sentence or elaborate it further – what does the Nemesis know about the PCs? How have their actions caused trouble for the Nemesis? What must now be done to bring the narrative back on track for the Nemesis?



First, there is "ooh" and "ah", then the screaming starts.

NAME

OBJECTIVE		
THEME		
OPENING SCENE/ SITUATION		
COOLNESS FACTOR		
NPCS		
MONSTERS		PAGE NO.
WHAT DO WE EXPECT?		
KEY DESCRIPTORS		
SIGHTS		
SOUNDS		
TOUCH		
TASTE		
SMELL		
MAPS NEEDED?		
NAMES - LIST 10		
WHAT DID YOU SEED?		

ADVENTURE PHASE PLANNER

DATE



Each moment in your Adventure Plan can be broken down into Phase Planner cards like the one on the previous page. The "Opening Scene/Situation" section is exactly that, how will you start the adventure?

By plotting out the opening scene of each adventure, you know where you need to get the PCs to for that point to trigger. For example, if your Opening Scene is a bar fight, all you can plan for is how to start it. You don't know if the PCs are going to go to the doctor afterwards, high-tail it out of town, or blow the building up. You'll need to wing it.

If then, your Introduction to the Villain/Henchmen has the opening scene of a hanging tree where some innocent is going to get hanged, you will need to figure out when to drop that into the PCs current story. If they decided in the first point to leave the bar after the fight and ride for the hills, well dropping a hanging tree into their path is easy. If, however, they chose instead to blow up the building and then stay in town, you need to let the events play out until such time as you can have a young NPC run in and tell everyone that a hanging is about to happen down by the old tree. If the PCs bite, then you have got to your next adventure point in the act and are golden.

We must remember that a large part of this game is about adjusting and making up links on the fly and the more you do it, the better you get. So, the template can really help guide you back to where you planned to be, regardless of how the PCs act.

Moving forward then, we get to the template itself. The objective is there. This is the objective of the Act point (from the previous template): it might be Introduction to setting, or Set-up, or Final Showdown, depending on where you are in the plotting process.

That is your objective, and you need to make sure that you remain on track when designing the scenes that will hopefully guide the players to understanding what the adventure is about at that point. Theme is there – always there. Use it, or don't. Your choice.

Opening scene or situation – this is where you can let your mind go mad and try to figure out an opening scene that fits with the objective of the point, and the theme, and where in the plot you are. Not every scene needs to be amazingly mind-blowing. Some will be mundane and routine. Some adventures will open in the same place – especially if you are in a sci-fi game aboard a starship. Just think: *Star Trek,* in its multitudes of TV series, has roughly 500 different stories that start either on a planet, a starship, or both. That's pretty much it. And yet, those stories are usually different enough for people to be comfortable watching the series over and over again.

Make it cool if you can, that's always nice. Think of a twist or something that takes the ordinary and makes it a little better. Some practical stuff on the template is – do you need NPCs or monsters? Now, nowhere in this book have I even spoken about stats, what rolls, skills or abilities stuff should have. The Master Plot really doesn't care what system you are using. But you do need monsters and NPCs – and ultimately you can stat them, skill them, and spell them up however you need to, depending on your game system. Give names to specific NPCs that you might want to keep using, and perhaps fill in an NPC sheet for them.

What do we expect of this scene? You decide on a bar-fight. What do we expect? I ask this over and over again to make sure that I'm constantly challenging myself. Do we expect the bar itself to get involved because it's a sentient being?



Key Descriptive words
I love to throw down a few words to remind myself of the scene. Then I've even included the senses and some words you can throw in there to really help keep you using your vocabulary to its maximum.

Do you need maps? Generally, I have a world map because it's usual for my PCs to go all over said world. I might have a location map of the city, if there are going to be significant adventures in the city and it becomes important. Actual locations like a bar or a small dungeon, I don't bother with. Why? Because making them up as you go is easy if you follow your common sense, and you want to be able to adapt to your players' interest. If they like what is happening, make it bigger, add more. If they seem bored you can make it smaller and it all feels seamless to the players. If you feel you need maps, sure thing, go make some and have them handy. www.Dungeonfog.com is great for that.

What?! 5 More names? Seriously? Yes, seriously! You can never have enough and players love names. And most of us hate making names up on the fly. It can be done, but sometimes you are too busy thinking of twenty other things to be bothered about a name. Help yourself to help yourself.

Many players will also see you making up names of NPCs on the spot and assume that the NPC has no value because you only made them now. This metagame thinking is going to happen, and you need to be careful to avoid it. Having a list makes this issue vanish and makes all your NPCs seem plotted and prepared.

What did you seed – as before, this may help you keep track better if you break it down to this level.



Scarvi knew if they found the location of his planet everyone would die. He just had to wait for the next shuttle off the station.

Although the adventure I refer to in these examples is just that – an adventure – it has been such a grand adventure that it has felt almost like a mini-campaign. This is, in part, due to me having a complex story that I needed to tell. There was the theme I needed to establish, and the adventure spans four kingdoms, contained a dungeon crawl, a political negotiation, and then a complex mystery. I think therefore, it is fair to use as an example here.

My sentence and my theme were my guides. Gravla wanted to destroy the Orders and restore the Dragons. Well, I knew that restoring the Dragons was never going to happen. It might have been her goal, but that wasn't my campaign story, so I only needed to focus on the first half of her plan: take control of the Order. Now I needed a way to get my PCs involved. The entire campaign, by the way, ran on the idea that there are three Orders who protect the world of Braxia from the return of the Dragons, who were evil tyrants. The Orders have fast flying airships to get around and prevent this kind of thing from happening. Linking all the ships together are telepathic oracles. Each ship has one oracle. If Gravla wanted to take over the Orders, she needed to corrupt the Oracles. The Oracles relay Order business to the captains of the ships (the PCs in this case). So how was she going to do it?

Well, I needed her to have allies, and because I knew she was never present, I needed these allies to feel like the true villains. That's easily done.

Adventure Part 1

Introduce the setting – start the group on an airship in 'simulation' combat with another airship. Excellent, it's fun and exciting.

Introduce the Villain – Right blow up the ship involved in the simulation. Try to blow up the PCs ship too, to make it personal.

Introduce the Plot – Someone is trying to blow up Order ships.

Set-up – Links to the Frozen Ziggurat, and another destroyed ship. Again, reinforcing this is the right location, but also including hints that this may be bigger than their first encounter.

First Attempt – the party tries to defeat the evil owner of the Ziggurat, only to discover one of the survivors of the downed ship is a member of a mysterious group which seeks an artefact of power.

Conclusion – defeat master of the Ziggurat and take member of the mysterious group hostage. However, also make the ship's Oracle kill herself – although it at first looks like murder. Why does she do that? Well, because she is tempted by Gravla. Why doesn't she tell anyone? Because I needed to make it feel as if the party had won, but not against the right people. She left a clue – the name of a Dwarvish city.

That is how the first part of the adventure played out. I seeded – yes, you'll get there – all kinds of things. Some paid off beautifully. Others fell flat and didn't go anywhere.

Now, when you look at all of this, the only 'leaps' of the imagination I needed to do were:

Setting – an airship battle? Not really. They have flying ships which are cool.



If that is to be the stage for my game, how can I not start on the airship? So nope.

The ice-elf inclusion – this was a distraction from the real enemy. It could have been anyone, goblins, orcs etc. Except that I needed a foe who represented the past. Extinct ice-elves. Bingo. So that wasn't hard.

A Ziggurat designed to defeat the Dragons – well, why did the Ice elves become extinct? They fought back against the Dragons when no one else did. So, they were destroyed. How did these ones survive? They must have been hidden from the Dragons. What if their Ziggurat was buried under a glacier and forgotten about? Excellent. But it needs to be high up – why? Flying ships. Right – put it on top of the biggest mountain in the world. An earthquake opens up a rift in the glacier and bingo, you get ice-elves.

The rest is really just nuanced ways in which I hinted at a bigger plot.

The second part of the adventure was not planned. The entire incident in the sandy deserts of Aki Sadab was as a result of one of the players, working against the party. It was certainly interesting, but had not featured in my plans. It was an Emergent Adventure – see later.

Late...



Keeping it on Track

Something that is vitally important to you, the Game Master, is feedback. Wait, I need a drink. BRB. Speaking of, during a coffee/beer/wine/smoke break, or at the end of a session, ask your players the following questions:

What do they think the plot is?

Who is the enemy?

What will change in their world if X happens/doesn't happen?

How are your characters going to change that/make it happen?

Four simple questions which will show you instantly what is going through the players' minds and whether or not you need to add a few more adventures to fill in the missing gaps. Ideally, players should be answering things like: "Well I think the plot is X… but there may be something more". And when you ask them their plan: "I think we need to do Y… because that will cause Z to happen." Importantly, their answers to 'how are their characters going to affect change?', and 'what is the plot?' should indicate whether they are following your threads or not.

It should also indicate which players are invested in the game. Answers like – 'I don't know', and 'haven't a clue' need to be interrogated to establish if it is because the player doesn't care, didn't take notes, or missed too many sessions. If they are confused because of all the different plot points they think they have, you need to act. Don't worry – it's OK, you have time to do it. You have an Ah-ha!

Ah-Ha! Adventures

The Ah-Ha! Adventure may happen multiple times in your campaign, or maybe never. It depends on how good you are at laying down the plot, and how sharp your players are. Most players need Ah-Ha! Adventures just to solidify the plot in their minds.

An Ah-Ha! Adventure is a discovery of information adventure that you play out for the benefit of your players. Typically, it plays as an 'accident' or mistake on behalf of the Nemesis. The PCs intercept a messenger who is carrying a note – on that note is written enough information that the players can piece together all they have and go Ah-Ha! It is not a single scene moment, as it might appear in the description above. The messenger they intercept should be neatly buried in an adventure. Make the players work for their information. Disguise it as a dungeon crawl or a treasure quest. The accidental discovery happens during the adventure.

It is critical for you to play this adventure as straight-forward and cleanly as possible. Remember, we are having an Ah-Ha! Adventure because you made your other adventures and plot clues too complex for the players. This isn't an adventure that needs to shine, either. If the players walk away with information they will not care if the adventure plot itself was mundane. They will feel triumphant. They know something that they didn't and it may affect the entire game. That is reward enough.

Now you are back on track, with the players in the know. I often find Game Masters don't ask their players questions of this nature often enough, and then wonder why the players are not so keen mid-campaign. If you do not know what your players are thinking, how can you know if your game is going well?



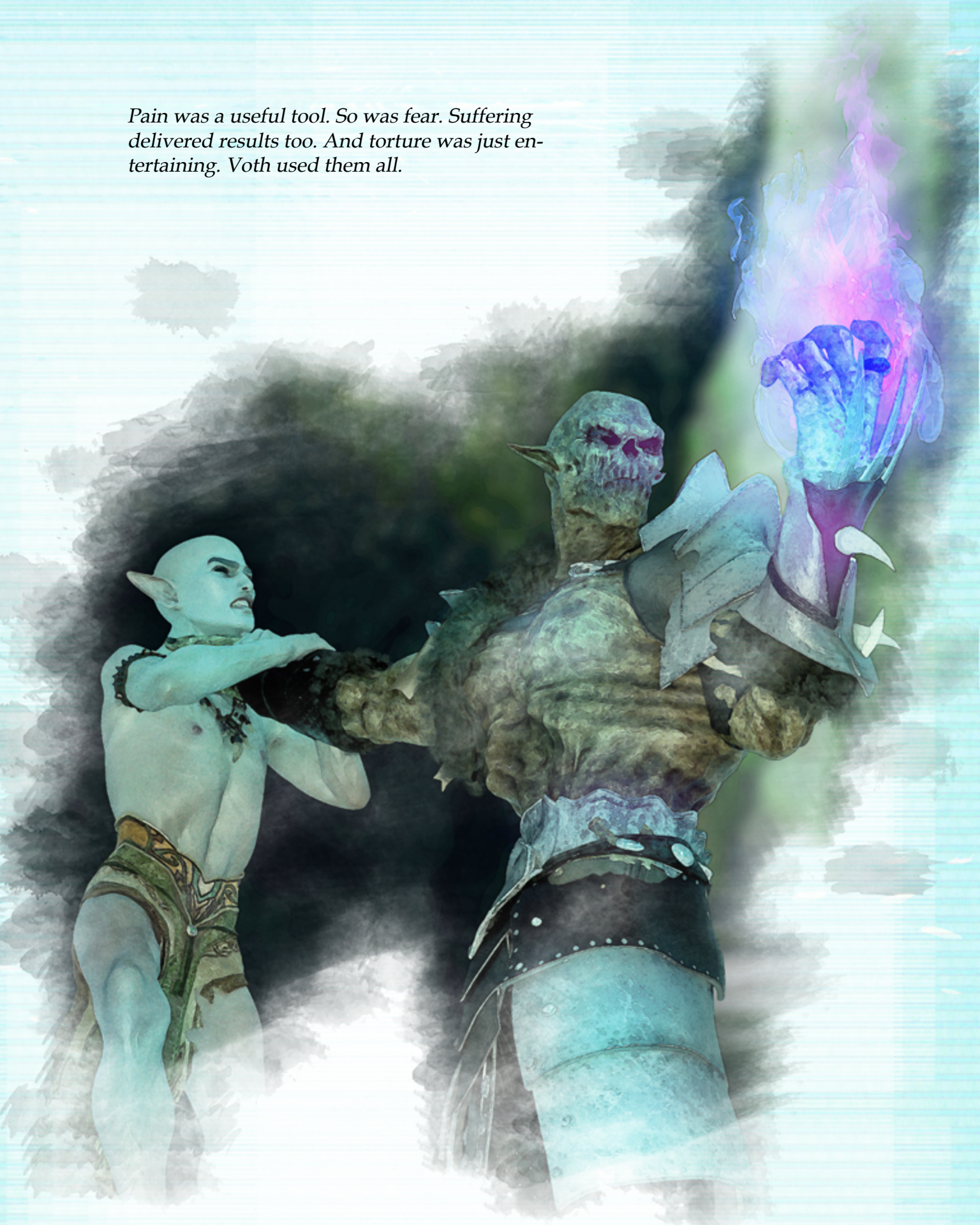
Asking if they are having fun is irrelevant. They come back for more, so assumedly they are. Asking what they think is going on is much more useful. Remember that, and throw in as many Ah-Ha's as you need.

If this happens mid-session and you have another adventure about to begin, stop! Ah-Ha trumps any timing schedule or Act structure you may have. Play the Ah-Ha! It's an adventure on the fly.



Who says the dark elves don't know what romance is?

Pain was a useful tool. So was fear. Suffering delivered results too. And torture was just entertaining. Voth used them all.



Adventures on the fly

You have it all planned out – the beginning, the middle, and the end. The maps are drawn and the NPCs are all balanced to perfection. You sit down, and begin: "The small village of Tatlingtine is calm…" One of your players suddenly cuts you off. They demand to steal a horse. The others follow along. Mounted, they flee Tatlingtine. One of the players declares that they are going to become bandits. You sit back and panic. Your adventure is supposed to be a Master Plot adventure where you are going to reveal the location of the summoning portal for the Empress's spirit. But the players stick to the road, avoid all ruined temples and the usual trick of just relocating your adventure to wherever they happen to be. It is time for an adventure on the fly.

You should, by now, be empowered to create a plot as you go – you need an introduction. Well, the players just declared they're going to be bandits. What follows is a few steps I thunder through as my players are gleefully doing whatever it is that they've decided to do:

What do we expect from their location/decision/actions?

How can that fit into the sentence?

An opening scene please…

I need four names – what are they?

And done. That's all I do. I answer those four questions and I'm golden. We're in for a magic ride. Each of those questions gives me material to work with and buys me time. Time to fill in the blanks, draw my conclusions and work out the situation.



These are also useful questions to ask yourself when players break from your intended path through your journey and go off and do something clever. Notice I don't ask how it applies to my Master Plot. It doesn't need to. I have time for that. It isn't critical to factor that in now. You are a Great Game Master, not a god – give yourself a break!

What do we expect from their location/decision/actions?

This is highly situation-dependent, of course, but it flows along the lines of building a quick library in your head of images, situations, and outcomes. They want to be bandits? What do we expect? A turf war with other bandits? Banditry? Stealing something of significance? There are many, many outcomes to 'what do we expect' here, so pick one and test it against question two. The idea of this first question is to get a few thoughts into your head, rather than the panic that you may have because they're not just off script, they're not even in the damned play.

How can that fit into The Sentence?

You are under pressure – it's the vague pressure that you, being a Great Game Master, should be able to swing a story out of nowhere. So, remember to relax. You have The Sentence, don't be afraid to use it. Now, in the context of what we expect from the actions of the players, we can play out that sentence. A rich noble wants his daughter delivered to her fiance as soon as possible, but he's hired a band of men to waylay the carriage on the road and murder her.

Why is he having difficulty? The players of course. How does this link to the players being bandits? Well, they expect to rob.

So, ask them where they go and what they set-up. They'll debate for a few minutes. Especially if you offer them a river crossing, a snowy pass, an abandoned village, a forest and an open field in which they might set-up their bandit headquarters. They're "running their own game" so they're going to put a lot of thought into their decision. Let them tell you, and then jump to them getting ready as they hear the approach of a wagon.

You have your sentence. You can now throw that whole idea into the situation that your players have created. What you need is an opening scene. We have to have an introduction – all our laws state it.

An opening scene please…

There is no point in dragging out the whole long affair of whatever your players are trying to do. Get them into the thick of it quickly. If they want to set up house, or explore a nebula, or raid a village, or burn a forest – montage jump to them ready to begin. Describe a few dramatic and heroic moments and then go. Start. With a bang. Sometimes literally.

There is nothing more exciting than for the players to have their PCs suddenly pick-up in the middle of something - chase, a fight, a dangerous situation, a difficult situation, a sexual situation, there are many. Choose one that fits with your general tone and with your Master Plot. Never hurts to bring that back, right?

I need four names

Jot down four names quickly, more if you can manage. One name is a location, the rest are NPCs. Don't fret if the names are totally inappropriate – they are there on paper so you can play with them as you need to.

Remember, the players will have to talk to one another from time to time. During that time, you can play with your ideas, names, and so on, to tailor them better.

And bingo – in the space of a brief smile, a few requests for the players to make a random but applicable skill check or a delaying comment, you've got your start.

Wait – what's this sorcery? A delaying comment?

A delaying comment

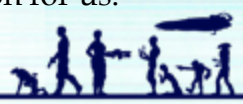
These are specifically placed phrases or comments that get the players to pause and debate for a few minutes, during which time you are making your notes and fleshing out the names that you do have.

Some examples – this is specific to each group, but if you get the idea, you can apply it anywhere:

> **GM:** Since this next adventure is going to be a little crazy, can you please just make note of your ammunition, and where your equipment is located on your body.

> **GM:** I'm doing a new type of check – called a combo. Please make a Survival, a Perception, and a Knowledge check – and add the number together. Then tell me the final result.

> **GM:** You clear the nebula and see a space station built in the style of <PLAYER A>'s home. Player A – describe a typical home from your region for us.



You can always fall back on the good old fashioned "can someone grab me a drink/snack?" It's not great, as it is so obvious. You want to be a Great Game Master. And take it from me, there is such a thing as too many snack breaks.

The important thing is that, when they are answering, you need to look as if you're taking note, but internally you're running your scenario and building up the scenes. The Combo check works so nicely because it's not a common check and can be a house-rule that you add to your games.



Slaves never have any rights, no matter which planet you visit.

Plot Twist

OK, so remember when we were creating our answer to the second question about The Sentence? We needed a difficulty for our villain to have. The obvious answer of "the PCs are the difficulty" is, well... obvious. It can work once or twice, but is fairly mundane. We want to elevate our game.

Thus, we can fall back onto a few means to take the mundane and make it extraordinarily awesome. Well, awesome. Great, at the very least. Listen, this is difficult enough without you rolling your eyes at the idea of creating an extraordinarily awesome plot twist on the fly whilst at the beginning of an adventure that you have no idea about – but it is possible.

And we need to do it too – remember most players are not idiots, and once you've proven yourself capable as a GM, they will become even more adventurous. New players throw surprises in, avoiding the clichéd responses to situations that veteran players will fall into. However, they are fairly linear in their thinking, because they don't know they can step off the path and onto the grass. Once they learn they can, you can bet they're gonna try to burn that grass whilst standing in the middle of the pyre.

A plot twist is simply a way of proving that you'd planned this whole adventure from the start, and that nothing the players do can ever unhinge your mind because you're three steps ahead. Well, we don't need to be three steps ahead, just half a step will do. It is when you are too many steps ahead that problems begin to happen.

Six ways to bring about a twist that opens up the world are:

Sudden Reveal
Sudden Reversal
Surprise Link
Secret Help
Sudden order to stop
Dark Pact – help now for help later

These you can throw into the mix at any time, and you can use repeatedly, or better yet, a combination of them throughout a single adventure, but never more than two, because it becomes a little silly after that. .

Sudden Reveal

This is a dramatic moment that will have consequences into the future and is the ultimate in seed-generating twists, too. Something that is taken for granted – something that is expected – is suddenly revealed to be more complicated than before, and the revelation is a personal link to the situation. This needs to be very carefully played out so as to not become old.

This bride is on her way to a marriage and her own murder – our PCs jump the wagon as the assassins strike. There is a combat with the assassins. Combat over, the players are impressed but assume the situation is over. Perhaps they might escort the victims of the assassination attempt back to town – that's their assumption. The twist is when the bride looks out from the wagon at a PC and declares: Brother! / Cousin! / Uncle! / Father? / You get the idea.

The bride is somehow linked to one of the PCs in the encounter.

It doesn't have to be by blood. It can be an old school friend, or a long-lost lover. Improvise as you see fit, but if you can remember their backstories it is always much more entertaining to bring out a character from their past. It makes you look like a Great GM and brings those players back under your control. Unless they are bad role-players.

The sudden reveal completely changes the course of action. Why? Because now the PCs have to deal with someone who has a strong link to them. All you need do now is link this NPC back to your planned adventure, and – holy smoke batman - you're back on track. Or, whilst the players debate what to do with cousin Enid, you are working on the next part of the adventure.

Now, if you think you can overuse this, look at this little cluster fu.. of the Sudden Reveal:

I'm your father, she's your sister, we're your parents: *Star Wars*.

Sudden Reversal

This is a fun one, because it causes players to have a moral dilemma which buys you time to plot out the next part of your adventure. The Sudden Reversal is where you reveal that the target of the PCs actions is actually not what they assumed. Don't over use this, because you will find your players losing interest in your adventures quickly if they begin to feel that every mission will have a reversal. The PCs arrive at the centre of the hive complex to destroy the queen, only to discover a note saying, "got you trapped". And then a giant collapse entombs them in the hive. That's ok... once. Twice, maybe. But more than that and your players will avoid missions. Warning over.

The Sudden Reversal can be that the target isn't located at the 'final showdown' location. It could also be that the enemy is not the enemy, but is under compulsion and begs the players to help them. The Terminator movie series was based on this idea. As the PCs are about to kill the monster, it begs for help.

Now, another warning… wow, Sudden Reversals are dangerous… once the enemy has become the ally, it must remain an ally. You can make it appear that it will betray the party, but it must never. The moment an enemy begs for mercy and then, months later, strikes at the party, your players will never forgive you and will slaughter any NPC that asks for clemency. If the NPC begs for mercy and then attacks immediately, that is OK. Once or twice, but again, use liberally.

Surprise Link

This one plays better later into the campaign than earlier, but can be used almost anywhere, except for Adventure One. Here, the PCs have their encounter and it goes according to expectation. Then they discover in the debris of the wagon a link to a previous action and a giant seed. Remember when I said Sudden Reveal was a great seeder? It withers and dies in comparison to the Surprise Link.

The Surprise Link is when you take something that was apparently trivial in the last mission, or last few missions, and add it mysteriously to the encounter. In the seeding chapter, that has yet to happen, a black dagger will appear again and again. By throwing a link into this fairly routine adventure, the adventure now moves from mundane to important. The PCs go from being in control of their destiny, to you being in control again as you now work that Surprise Link into the great narrative.



Too many links, however, and your players will drown. You also need to keep note of this link. Say the bride has a tattoo of a black dagger on her wrist. That's an awesome twist.

The PC's now forget all about being bandits and want to know what the dagger means. Great for you – they're back on track. You have an NPC who can lead them in the direction you need them to go and life is good. Remember your Master Plot, and the example I used at the beginning of the chapter – needing to get the PCs to the location of the temple? Well, the bride can refuse to answer, except an astute PC notices mud on the wagon wheels from a specific valley, that's the only place this kind of mud is found locally.

Secret Help

This is one of the best 'get out of jail' free cards you can have as a GM. Sadly, you can only use it maybe twice in a campaign, and then you have to avoid it, if playing with the same player group. The PCs are doing their thing, and you ramp up the danger. At the most critical moment, there is some help from somewhere in some form. Could it be a voice in the head of a PC? Or an arrow fired with amazing accuracy at the lead assassin?

Secret help is just that. The PCs know they have been helped, but they don't know by whom. They might look for clues – throw in a seed here. Now you have this benevolent force that is helping the PCs. Later on, you can reveal this benevolent force as a Sudden Reveal or a Surprise Link. How wonderful. You've created a whole new string of possible adventures for the PCs to follow, whilst seeding an excellent source of control and influence over the players' decisions.



It is winter, and food is scarce. The mother dragon must hunt, or stave...

Secret Help can be given once or twice before you need to advance the Secret Help to Known Help, at which point it becomes a series of adventures that you have planned out.

Sudden order to stop

This one requires the PCs to be beholden unto someone. Or, and this is a big or, your Nemesis/villain needs to swallow humble pie. The order to stop can be issued as the battle is about to reach a bloody end. It totally twists the entire adventure on its head. Why was it ordered to stop given?

If the Sudden Order to Stop was given by a higher authority that the PCs believe in or follow, there should be a good reason. Now, we have hundreds of films with detectives who are told to stop pursuing a case by a higher power. It isn't new. It's a great way to make the players want to do more of what they have just been told to stop doing. You need a good idea, too, as often this turns the adventure into a bit of a political game and the one who ordered the cease-and-desist often turns out to be the real villain. You can, of course, twist that too.

If the villain reveals themselves and orders the stop of the assassination – why? What has caused this sudden change of heart? Not all villains are happy to watch their well-trained, highly expensive, time invested troops getting slaughtered. That would be a real twist, right?

Of course, they may have been testing the PCs resolve – as so often happens in alien movies where the aliens might just win with a few more minutes of heavy fighting, and yet they suddenly pull back. I hate those twists. The master wanted to test their defences? If they were winning there is no need to regroup and attack again! Finish the job.



However, the attack is a diversion, something needed only long enough to keep the characters busy. Well now - that is, in my opinion, a better play. The Sudden Order to Stop is revealed, later on, to all be a diversion and was only needed for a specific amount of time.

Dark Pact

This one is a seed generator, a trojan horse, and a delicious option if you have players in your group who are power hungry monsters who believe they can outwit any being you can throw at them. The Dark Pact is when a force or being offers to help the PC,s in exchange for a favour later. It is the ultimate moral mouse trap.

My players know – never trust a Dark Pact offer, and yet they take it every time because they know it will always lead to much more interesting situations down the line. You can only really use this once or twice in a game. Unlike Secret Help – to which this is very similar – there is a definite 'small print' to this assistance. Secret help is benevolent. This is malevolent. The offer has a far greater price than just winning a battle, defeating a monster, or overcoming an obstacle.

Critically, the pact doesn't actually resolve the situation either. It is merely a boost that, if used correctly by the PCs, will see them to victory. It can fail. This is often a better outcome because then the Dark Pact was made for no gain and only loss. This somehow seems more satisfying to the PCs because they know internally they should never have taken it anyway.

The Dark Pact maker will come back later in another adventure to claim their reward. This is, once again, a controlled adventure that you now can work your magic into.

Once these twists have played out, you normally have a new direction for the adventure. That is why I say you don't need to plan beyond the opening scene when the players break away on their own adventure. It is going to change and evolve quickly anyway, so planning is silly.

You can also gauge how your players are feeling about the situation – perhaps they regret their decision (highly unlikely) and so you can end the adventure off fairly quickly, or perhaps they are loving the adventure and want more. In which case, you simply develop out the plot as it now has unfolded depending on which twist you used.

One way or another, you've created a villain with a goal, and that goal has now been subverted. There will be repercussions. The PCs have a fairly clear path ahead of them, perhaps – again depending on which twist you used. You are into the body of the adventure. As with your planned adventure, you know what is required. Play it out and work your way through to the conclusion. Buy yourself time if you need, using those delay questions or take a loo break. You are only human.

Emergent Adventures

Now that you have unleashed your powers of creating awesome Adventures on the fly, you can now look at these Emergent Adventures which have started growing organically in your Master Plot. Emergent Adventures are adventures which have appeared because of a random seed you threw in, or because of a comment you made in passing, or a scene you described that the players have picked up on and want to explore. Alternatively, the players have decided to do something unexpected and it requires an adventure to play out in.

These often happen because you're in the zone of telling the story and you throw in a detail that has no value at all, but which the players ascribe great value too, and that is excellent. It's a great indicator that your players are engaged with your story and eager to explore it – so you should embrace emergent adventures as the highest form of praise for your efforts and work. The players want more.

These adventures also often flow almost immediately from the previous adventure and can require some on-the-fly creativity from you, hence their inclusion here. Play them out exactly how you would run a random adventure, using the delaying tactics that I mentioned in the beginning of the chapter and then twisting it up to make it seem as if it was all linked and part of your plan.



Just one drop of blood, and the suit was ruined...

We head back to my online game – The Adventures of the Windswift. As you've by now read, part of their adventure takes place in the desert and holds all kinds of wonderful ramifications for the party. It was a completely emergent adventure. It emerged because one of PCs had a backstory that had them seeking something. The prisoner, the party had obtained from the Ziggurat, tried her best to escape – see NPC goals later – and offered to help the PC gain information on what he was seeking in exchange for her freedom – a standard prisoner ploy, in my opinion. Well, he let her go.

My Adventure Plot was derailed. She was not the only link to the rest of the plot, but she was the fastest route the players' characters would have to ending the adventure! She was going to be broken under torture and reveal a chunk of information. WTF? However, I realized that I could use it to make the game even more exciting when my other players decided to try track her down. We had an emergent adventure and I needed to capitalize on it. I knew my theme and so I figured I needed a Guide – see NPCs later – that would help explain the situation to my players and keep things on track.

The Guide turned out to be a trader who was extremely eager to trade with the party. He gave them all kinds of information, and later they used him to help them further their plans. I also realized that I didn't want this adventure to go on too long and needed to give some time for the 'oaths' that two of my players had wanted to do for some time. You can watch the season to see how it played out, but the long and short of it is – they got the prisoner back in the end and got all the information I needed her to give them. That was the objective of the adventure, to further my main plot for the adventure and give the party a clear line of action.

Brax oh mightiest of the gods,
I sit before you humbled and in need of guidance.
A great Darkness looms ever closer over Braxia, we your people need your help again.
300 hundred years ago you helped us banish the menace into the darkness and we prospered because of you.

The mortals have failed you, squabbling over politics and loosing sight over the bigger picture.
We have failed you,
The 3 orders have fallen sick with delusion of grandeur, they fester within our midsts and corrupt minds that swore to uphold the divine task to keep the people of your world safe.
I have failed you,
Naivete blinded my senses and trust dulling my vigilance.

The time of failure must end.
Now I know of these traitors,
Now I know their plans to open the gates and let the defilers themselves return.
Now I know of their Insane thirst for power and blinded ambition that led them to believe they can control Chaos.

I sit before you with burning conviction besieging you, to grant me your divine help.
Let me pledge myself to you.
Grant me your divine guidance,
Grant me your divine wisdom,
Grant me your divine power,
To seek out these sinners
And smite all those wrongdoers!

For I swear on my name
To keep the horrors away from the people;
For I swear on my body
To bring the sword to those who would make a deal with the devil himself;
For I swear on my soul
To serve your divine task to keep the darkness in the shadows where they belong.

Blaxton Rose, Paladin of Brax, The Adventures of the Windswift.





She was a lone rider... What did she expect - riding a Zebra into battle...

Character plots

You have helped your players craft the most wonderful backstories that don't involve both parents of the character being killed in a tragic manner. You have helped your newer players to embrace roleplaying. You've done all that and they still expect more! Why shouldn't they? I often hear people claim that the GM is no more responsible for the story than the players. Quite right.

The interactions of the players' characters with the world the GM creates and presents is the story. The plot comes from the GM and the GM alone. The characters may seem to want to go off on their own, unlinked adventures not out of curiosity, as in Emergent Adventures, or through defiance, as in Adventures on the Fly, but because of their backstory.

Does this sound familiar? "My character has a sister she is looking for. I want to find her. All I have as a clue is this ivory comb and a small lock of her hair."

You must now facilitate these character adventures by creating a plot – one that seamlessly fits into the narrative. Unlike the other types of adventures, this is a very personal one, and one that requires you to bring your A-Game. Here we do not use the delaying tactics of Adventures on the Fly, we use a special one…but more to the adventure first.

How do you do it, when faced with player generated material? You have no clue what the player was thinking, nor do you have any idea where they might be heading. Often, they don't either. They just go because they have a drive to find out their backstory, and why not? I agree. They are better players because of it!

This is no longer a random adventure, this now is an adventure opportunity for you to flex your GM muscles and prove your mettle as a Master of the game. No one can prepare adequately for a character-driven story, because you haven't read the character background since level one which was months ago, or even if you are the most conscientious record keeper, you can't know what is in the mind of the player – more so than just in general, I mean. A single sentence in the backstory, "Jonai said goodbye to his childhood friend Morkaid and moved to the city" may have seemed innocuous at the time of writing.

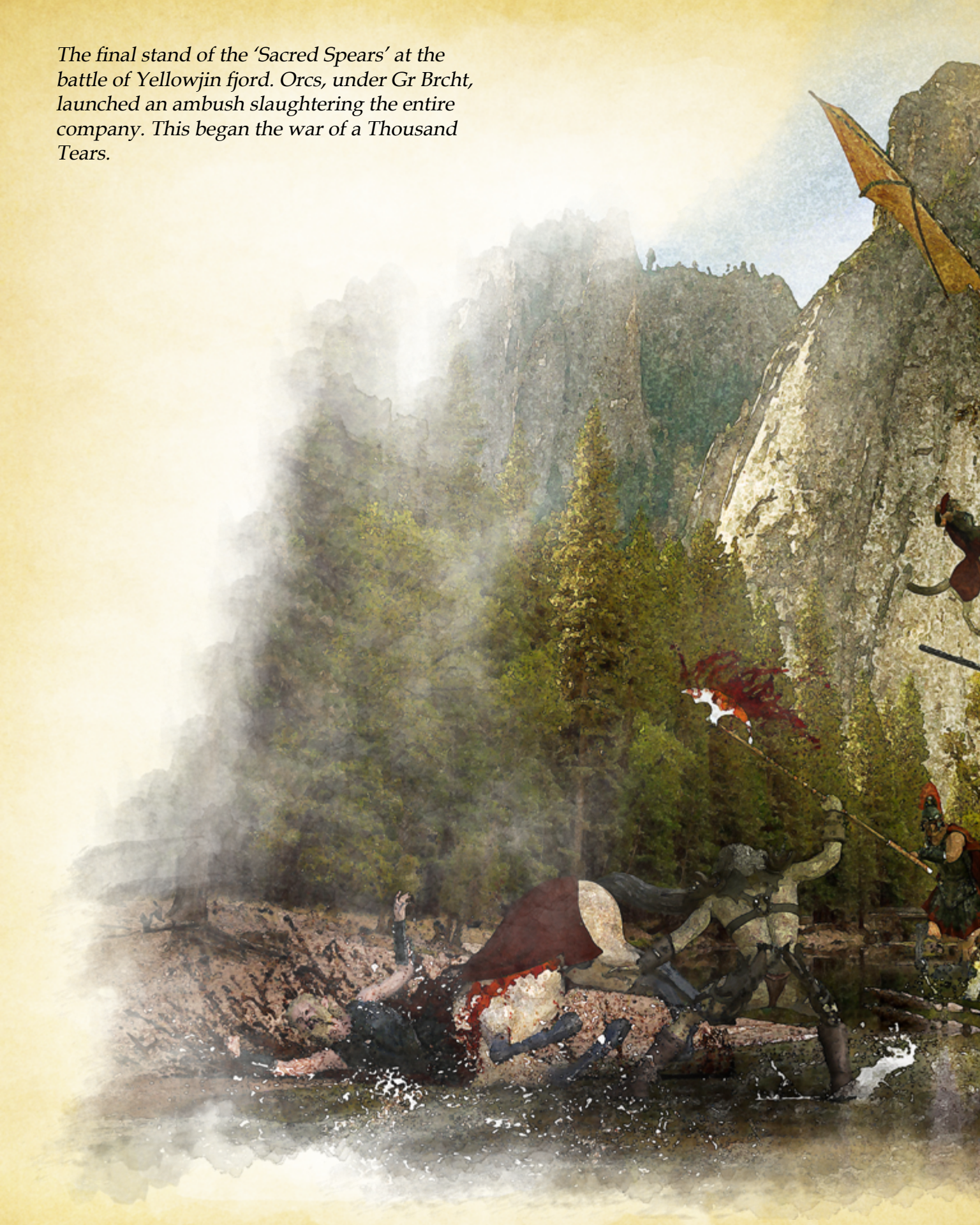
Now, however, the player has been mulling over that sentence. And at the beginning of the session declares: "I want to find Morkaid. I haven't seen him for ages." The rest of the party agree and so the player turns to you: "Do I know where Morkaid is?" Or starts their journey to the old village where Morkaid was last seen.

What to do? You only know Morkaid as a single sentence, and you have no clue why the character wants to go and see Morkaid. You could call for a time-out. Tell the players to go get drinks. While they do, you can reread the backstory of the player. You could do that. But I don't like to interrupt a game like that, and besides, there is a better way: insert one old friend.

As the party makes its way to the village where Morkaid was last seen, have them bump into Usha. She isn't mentioned in the backstory, but a village is full of people. She can recognize the PC and come over for a chat. In this chat, she will first ask why the PC wants to see Morkaid. They might give you a hint or a clue when they answer. They might also be vague.



The final stand of the 'Sacred Spears' at the battle of Yellowjin fjord. Orcs, under Gr Brcht, launched an ambush slaughtering the entire company. This began the war of a Thousand Tears.





Item from the past

They could come across an object – perhaps it is a stream that Morkaid and the PC used to swim in. You are making all this up obviously but a quick sentence thrown at the PC solves it: *"You come across the stream where you and Morkaid used to swim and race boats made of Haffa nut shells."*
This will perhaps prompt the PC to give you some information, or for another player to ask why Morkaid is so important.

Change the emotional focus

Let the PCs arrive in the village and tell them Morkaid ran away moments after the PC left for the city. By shifting the emotional burden back onto the PC, you are effectively taking back control of the story. Invariably, the PCs will want to find Morkaid. Especially if you play it up as emotionally charged.

DO NOT DESTROY/KILL A CREATION OF THE PC'S PAST!

To simply state that Morkaid is dead, and leave it at that is criminal. Why did the player bother to write a backstory if you are just going to erase it? You can and will kill off or destroy items from the PC's backstory, but only once the PC has encountered it IN GAME and claimed it as their own. Then you can do as you will because there is value in that.

DO NOT DELAY ARRIVAL AT SAID GOAL

To dodge the outcome by throwing obstacles in the way is also poor form in my opinion. Sure, throw in a delay or two to test the resolve of the character. But give it to them. Then, turn it into the source of an adventure.

DO NOT LET THE PLAYER GET TO THEIR GOAL AND END THERE!

Never let the PCs get to the goal and leave it at that. The party arrives to find Morkaid working as a blacksmith. YAWN. Morkaid should be in trouble, causing trouble, or involved in trouble and need the PCs to help or assist in some way.

Why?

Well, quite simply, if the players turn to their character backstories for inspiration and for a goal, you should make damned sure that it looks as if you had planned out an adventure based on those backstories. Now, I most certainly would not try to pre-empt this and actually go ahead and write small missions for all the entries in the players' backstories that they submit. By now, you've slogged through an ungodly amount of words to get here (30, 000, if you're super interested), some of it must have sunk in, so creating Adventures on the Fly, seeding, and working with plot should be second nature.

How you then work out the plot of the PCs backstory adventure should be determined by a few factors:

Current tone/atmosphere
Position of the Master Plot
"Screen time of the player who controls the character"
Buy-in from the other players

Current tone/atmosphere

If the PCs have been struggling hard and can't seem to get much done with the Master Plot, this character plot should definitely result in a strong win for the PCs.

Players get demoralized. Give them something to smile about. So, create an adventure that starts out with a perilous situation and then turn it into a triumph. On the other hand, if the PCs have been dominating the game and just destroying everything, maybe this could be the one where things are just a little tough, and without them working together as a team they could lose. If the atmosphere is one of horror and dread, make this a light adventure. I find this helps me tremendously to keep the tone shifting and dynamic and ensure that the stories are varied in their feel.

If you have a strong theme use this as a counterpoint. Let the players see it as such, so that they can reflect on the situation. A classic example is *Rivendell* in the *Lord of the Rings*. Amidst the horrors of the *Ring Wraiths*, death, and carnage, there is this place of peace. The quests here are about love and history, about friendship and joy. Step outside and it's darkness and hate, survival and doom.

Position of the Master Plot

You should know where in the Master plot you are. If you don't, then this book clearly hasn't helped you at all. By knowing where you are in the Master Plot, you can decide how much time to give this adventure and thus can craft it to fit. If the Nemesis is in the 'build' phase, then you have as much time as you like. That secret star-killer base can pop up in minutes or in months, it just depends on how long it takes the PCs to get there. Don't panic, and please, dear gods in all the pantheons of all the roleplaying games, do not rely on real-world time for this. During the medieval period and at the height of the architectural period, it took 90 odd years for a cathedral to be built. Yes, it did. I have a GM Walk-about video to prove it...

Those stonemasons didn't have access to handy stuff like magic. The Cardinals could pray as hard as they liked, but the cathedral wouldn't be finished faster. In roleplaying, a cleric could quite literally pray really hard and bless all the workers to get a mechanical advantage. Wow, I rant a lot. Sorry. Another way to look at it: famously starships in most sci-fi series move at the speed of plot, rather than light. It's more useful and keeps sci-fi films running time down. Use film time not real time. It's much more interesting.

If, on the other hand, your Master Plot is nearing the zenith of the Nemesis's plan and the full moon has been established as being only six days away, and yet the player insists on going to find their backstory goal thing, warn them (if they are aware of the fact) and then go ahead and plan a short adventure – as in a minor scuffle, a sing-song, a strange ruin that can be completed in a single night of good looting and pillaging. Players like to explore their backstories and, again, I don't think it fair that we as GMs punish them for deviating from the main plot. If they continue to persist, however, let your Nemesis finish and win. There is also a certain amount of respect the players should give you as the GM.

Screen time

Some players just love to run around and explore and have fun. We love these players and like to give them what they want. If, however, we've just come off an adventure that was focused on their past, and they try to go on another one straight away, it is time to make it a short one. There is only so much time that a single player should have before the other players need their moment to shine.



Guns were overrated, gravity on the other hand...



On the contrary, if the player is exploring an aspect of their background for the very first time then, by all the powers at your command, make it a good one. Players should be encouraged to look to their past and to explore those angles that they wrote down so long ago. Make sure they are aware of the rewards of doing so. Similarly, if you can find a way of linking in a player who has had little opportunity to shine, do so. Part of our duties as Game Master are to share the time each player gets. A sneaky way to do this is to ask for a character's backstory during a natural break in the game and slot them into the adventure.

Buy-in from the other players

There are many players who don't like the lime-light and prefer to be support. They eagerly go with the flow. This is great. There are also many players who get bored of exploring the same player's background time and time again. You must 'read' your players and figure out if they are genuinely interested in exploring the adventure, or just doing it because they have to. Although it is nice for that one player to have an adventure based on their backstory, if the other players seem disengaged you need to bring them into it somehow, or terminate quickly so that you can return to your regular Master Plot adventures.

This is often a case of balance, a skill that novice Game Masters often lack and that more experience ones handle like professionals. Keeping track of who has been active in the session, who has had a chance to talk, to plan, to shine, and who has not, is something that you learn over time to do almost subconsciously. Until you get it right, to move between your players, encouraging those less active to be more active and those who won't shut up to quieten down, there is another method which works well to train you as a Game Master, and to help bring a little order to your chaos, and to make the players feel more included.

Out of combat turn order. Call it what you will, but having the players all roll a die to determine talking order and then keeping track of it is a wonderful means of ensuring equality. At all times until you become a little more comfortable, and then only as needed to reign in the enthusiastic, you should stick to the order, moving from one player to the next, actively asking them for what they want to do, say, feel etc. It really helps.

After a while, it becomes second nature to move through all of those at your table methodically and equally.

Finally, when working with Character Backstory or plot remember to never destroy or reduce. This is an adventure based on something that the player wrote. It is their contribution to the grand story. Make sure you show it respect when turning it into an adventure. Focus on making it cool. To simply have the outcome become facile or irrelevant to the game does not help anyone, and certainly doesn't make for good storytelling.

In the 'Adventures of the Windswift' the players are all very determined not to steal the limelight from one another, and I'm always amazed at how they try, as often as they can, to incorporate one another in the story. To the point that sometimes it causes trouble - such as all of them storming into a cave of certain doom, or in one of the latest episodes, all of them boarding a ship with a known Vampire Count, in an attempt to delay his departure.

It would have been OK if the Count had been placated, but when he decided to leave the PC's had no recourse but to attack. And attack they did. Sadly for them, at the same time, some helpful druids sealed the entire ship inside a giant frozen sphere of ice and water, effectively trapping their only means tof escape.

As the GM, I was now faced with the dilemma that so often faces us - the entire party runs the risk of death, and because of narrative actions decided upon long before, death became the only outcome - with no hope of escape either. All I could do was to run the combat between the PCs and the Vampire as best I could, accounting for the Vampires history and background.

Needless to say, the game was saved by some remarkably clever thinking on behalf of the players, and some equally lucky dice rolls.

The entire episode can be found on the Bacon RPG YouTube channel - chapter five - the episode entitled 'The isle of the druids' starts the entire downward spiral into chaos and near death...





It is always tentacles... never dental floss.

Timing

This talks to the Act structure of your Adventure – not your Master Plot! The Master Plot, although it is broken into adventures, is not a timed beast. It is much bigger than mere time and space. Trust me. So, this timing refers specifically to within your adventure, and with regards to a 121 or 122 structure. A single adventure may take three or four sessions of play, a Master Plot could in theory, and using that timing, take 112 odd sessions to play through or more.

Many people baulk - yes, baulk I say - at the idea of working to a fixed timing for your game. I am one of those people. Nothing is fixed. Nothing is perfect and nothing can be rushed without losing something. So, I do not say that your timing should be to the minute. What I do say is that your timing should be a guide and a yard-stick to help you.

This whole book is about developing skills that will help you manage your game in a seamless and apparently completely planned manner. Time therefore, should be an ally, not an enemy. How do we use time as an ally? Well, if we take it as the following – Act 1 is a single session, Act 2 is two sessions and Act 3 is either one session or two sessions - that means we have roughly 4 or 5 sessions per Adventure. Is that too much? Is it too slow? That depends on your group and on whether you have Story Plotters or Follow Plotters. It also depends on you – what do you like?

Pacing – which is essentially what we're doing when we use a rough timing guide – is subjective. Some films drag on and on and on, and others just slip past in a few seconds. Game sessions are the same – some drag on interminably, others flash past.



What causes that magic? What drives that Relativity of Time? It can only be the immersion factor and the change of events that captivate us.

A basic 3-4 hour session you can fill with all kinds of things. I've read and heard of many Game Masters describing the rough timing of a single round in a game as being a factor of 30 seconds multiplied by the number of players and the GM. For 4 players and a GM, each 'round' is about 2 and a half minutes. This doesn't take into account pauses for coffee slurping, dropping the dice on the floor, or looking up rules quickly. It's an average.

If we delve into the nitty-gritty maths – which I hate, but must concede here has validity – 10 rounds of combat are unlikely to finish up in less than 20 minutes if there are 4 players. That is half an hour odd (notice my hyperbolic extension to prove my point?) for what is effectively dead narrative time. Yes, you can inject some villainous speech or short bursts of information, but in most roleplaying games, combat is a mathematical equation that is randomly resolved and narrative is for colour only.

In a 3-hour session – or in one Act – if you have three combats, you only have 1h30 remaining for narrative. That isn't a problem if you want good balance between story and action. In my sessions combat usually is factored down significantly. It rarely lasts longer than 4 or 5 rounds – which is still a good 10 minutes. And I have maybe one or two combats per 3-hour session. My focus is on the story – as indicated by this book.

What is my point? My point is that you need to be aware of the implications of timing on your game. To master the plot, to master the power of having this knowledge help and assist you – you need to know how it impacts you.

To illustrate: if you now know that you have a 5-hour session, or maybe longer ahead of you – you can sit back and relax. You know your players enjoy combat, and they enjoy plot. Now, by keeping an eye on the clock, you can spend at least 1 hour exploring the plot and interrelated stuff – character dynamics, backstory, history etc. Then you have plenty of time for a fun bit of action that can take 35 minutes to play out. With searching of the bodies and the post-combat discussions and looting, we can round it out to 1 hour and 45 minutes. You decide that the next step needs a bit of elaboration and know that you have 3 hours and some change free. Give the party a trail of clues and a bit of a run around to find the next step in the quest. A riddle perhaps. An hour slips by. Time for another combat or combat-like encounter? If you are in Act 2 and you are heading for the second half of the Act – but that is planned for next session – you know you need to get the party to the ancient ruins by the end of this session which is now around 2 hours left. The combat was too easy and seemed to be over too quickly.

You have time for at least another major or complex combat, plus then your story to the ancient ruins. Easy – you (on the fly) decide that the combat was a prelude to a bigger encounter – a complex social dialogue between the chief and the party - and the end result will be that the party helps defend the chief's tribe to gain trust. You've read the chapter on seeding – that mythical chapter – and you know how to do it like a pro. So, 30 minutes on discussions with the chief, and then a good hour-long combat with minor goals and objectives. The end result – the chief will escort the characters to the ancient ruins and show them the easiest way. 30 minutes of you and the party walking through to the ancient ruins with some knowledge rolls or skill checks along the way and boom, baby – you are home and dry.

5 Hour Session

60 min	45 min	60 min	15 min	60 min	60 min	60 min
Character Plot Recap Intro	Combat Looting	Riddles Options Decisions	Short combat	Discussions Revelations Plans	Combat Looting	Rewards Walk Talk

You had planned only two encounters and didn't even know that there was a chief who needed the help of the party until your timing, your understanding of the Act structure, and your new-found knowledge of how to tell a good plot kicked in and helped your ass to create an amazing moment in the story, keep the game moving forward, and let the players decide how to do everything and thus tell the story. It isn't magic, it's just time management. And seeding. Lots of seeding.

Anyone who has played with me when I can use music – i.e. in non-copyright infringing games – knows that I love to use music. They also know that I have an uncanny knack of making sure the music climaxes at precisely the right moment, so that when I pause dramatically, the music does something that builds the scene even more. They love it. It is all just careful timing on my behalf and having the ability to know where my music is going, so I can tailor my timing to it.



It creates a great feeling and atmosphere and is impossible to do if you don't know how to pace yourself. Now, I only use movie soundtracks in my games. Why? Because they're written in a 3-act structure, and for all their beauty and wonderful complexity, I know they have some quiet pieces and some dramatic pieces.

A soundtrack also typically runs for 60 odd minutes. Yes, I repeat tracks and skip some - because I know what is coming up next, and to keep it fitting in with my current timing in the game - but I also keep note of the time so I know that on the CD – oops, I mean MP3 track listing – in 5 minutes is a sad piece, I need to make the scene sad.

I'm not advocating that you do this, especially if death metal folk music from Slovakia is your music of choice. What I am illustrating is that timing extends beyond just planning your game sessions, but to enhancing your game sessions. It really can be a powerful tool – and again, it is one of the many tools in this book to help you create a seamless experience for your players.



The healing hug - not often used except in the most dire of circumstances.

The Panna'hai Vanguard were never heard from again...



Seeding the future

Here it is – the chapter you've been waiting to skip to. Seeding! Seeding - or as the professionals call it, Foreshadowing - is the art of apparently telling the players early in the game something that only much, much later comes true and makes sense. The players think you are a master storyteller because you somehow managed to predict the future.

Since we can't go back to the past, nor can we alter the future, the only place to start Seeding is in the present. I know that sounds awfully trite, but it is also true. And I mention it specifically this way because it is important to realize we can only Seed **now**. Not in next week's adventure, or last week's adventure. This is important, because so often we plan to do stuff and then don't do it - we're waiting for the perfect moment. That moment is always now.

What is a Seed? Basic concept: Giving the players a piece of information, an object, a clue that has no reason, no connection, and link to anything. It is just a thing you throw out in a description. Later – hours, weeks, months in real time – said piece of information, object or clue is revealed to be directly linked with the current happenings in the game, but only because you have now given it said connection to the game. Long and short – you throw out something arbitrary in today's game, and in six months' time that thing pops up in the game and causes trouble for the PCs. Right, so Seeding requires us to drop stuff into the game now for use later. No. Not quite. Seeding requires us to drop stuff into the game. Full stop.

For use later requires us to have a plan, which we don't, because if we did then we wouldn't need to Seed. So, we just need to drop stuff into the game. That seems easier, right?

What stuff? You had to ask that question. Well there are a few things we can Seed:

Names
Places
Objects
People
Dreams/Portents/Omens/Signs
Names

Names

An NPC, as they die a horrid death, utters the word "Rosebud". No reason. A lord says: "I wonder if it was Gasford?" A piece of radio chatter says: "Dark Dan has been at it again." You can drop names like a social climber at a charity event. Go mad.

Let your players gleefully write down all these names. You must too. Rule 1 of Seeding – keep track of all your Seed. Yeah. I said it. Dropping a name is incredibly powerful because it gives the PCs something tangible. They don't know if it is a place, a person, a code, or a clue. Neither do you, but that isn't important. It has been planted.

Places

This is an easy Seed too: PCs move from place to place all the time. Throw in a description of an old graveyard that they pass, a ruined space station in orbit of a dying sun, a marsh or swamp on the edge of the road. If your PCs want to explore it, you have yourself an Emergent Adventure. If the PCs ignore it – excellent. Make a note of it and remember it's a Seeded place. The Players know of it. Your goal with Seeding is to establish it in the mind of the player. Once it is there, you have total power.



Objects

This can be tricky with high-magic games, or where PCs are tenacious. They slay a wizard and find a black dagger on his belt. It's just a black dagger. A captain has a bizarre cobalt metal dog tag around his neck with no inscription. These are little trinkets or big ones that you can hand out with a search check. Don't panic about what they mean or how they can be used later. All you need to do is make a note of it. Bigger objects – such as starships or boats – have a function and the PCs can use them without issue.

In fact, it makes it better if they do. It gives it more ground in their minds as an item of value. You must, however, pay attention to how you describe it. When Seeding an object, give it a little more description than the other items around it. Players will pick up on the additional flavour and make a note of it.

People

NPCs are either ignored, gored, or whored.. oh, and occasionally spoken to. Some partys love NPCs, and others hate them with a passion. Either way, having a random NPC mention some news to the PCs, or introduce themselves in a tavern, bumping into the PCs and apologizing, just asking for help or a few coins (the choice really is up to you) is an amazing technique of Seeding. It makes your world feel more real and, of course, Seeds a character into the minds of the players. You don't need to oversell the NPC – you don't need them to join the party, share drinks and then leave. You can, and that can work beautifully, but a simple nod in the market square might be enough, too.

Dreams/portents/omens/signs

A lot of people get nervous when the players have their PCs see the future or have waking dreams. I love it. The players have basically asked me to Seed a whole bunch of stuff. And they help me to do it! When handling these kinds of Seeds, it is best to do the following:

Avoid definitive PC information – the figure looks like X, you can clearly see it is Y.

Embrace definitive information - names, places, NPCs, objects or items.

Why? Because you have the power to drop Seed-able things in anytime. So, you say something like: "you see yourself, and someone else is with you. In the glow of the moonlight a figure sits on a log, shrouded in shadow. A pipe, carved from the thigh bone of a virgin, flares up with green flame that smells of jasmine in summer. In his left hand he holds a dagger? No! A Sword. It is bright silver and covered in strange writing. The writing moves and suddenly the figure attacks! You wake up."

Keep the player character's experience vague, keep your things specific. How easy will it be to now, in another game session, to have a strange figure sitting on a log, smoking a pipe and holding a sword? Pfft, dead easy. Yet your players will think you're damn sly. There is a better way to play that, by the way. The pipe should be found smouldering and abandoned before the PCs enter the wood. That way, their brains start to link the pipe to past experience, making the moment that much richer. Anyway… the point isn't to trick your players, it is to create an entertaining experience.



Use it all

So, we have Seeded a whole lot of things in our game and we've taken copious notes about the things we have Seeded. Sit back and relax, this is a long game plan and takes a bit of thinking, so brace yourself. The game runs, and for weeks you have fun. Suddenly, one of the players has their character search a random merchant. You panic! What is on this merchant and how can you use it to enhance the story?! The Seed! The Seed! That black dagger the wizard had months ago? This merchant has another one! Lo! It was foretold that another would be found.

What is the black dagger? Who knows? You have now Seeded it a second time. But Seeds grow and so must yours. So now instead of the merchant just having a black dagger, he must now kill himself to avoid revealing the information. Why? Because the "plot must thicken". Not our Master Plot, or even the plot of the adventure. The Seed plot if you will.

You have now created a link between the wizard and the merchant. Time to review your own Seeds. What could be the link? And why is it so important that the merchant kills himself? Or is he killed by an assassin, or does he turn to ash once the dagger is removed? You made something up on the fly. Assess it, and link it in.

This is the key – linking Seeds together. One Seed that is used up the next time you encounter it is perfectly OK. But it is not Master Game Mastering. You want Seeds to link together from disparate adventures, to weave background tales and stories that seem incredibly intricate. So, your Seeds need to grow and spread into the tree that will be the Adventure's culmination. So poetic. I know. I know.

Link a few Seeds together. How? By assessing what we expect from them. We have expectations about almost everything. I show you an image of a hobbit and you expect food, rings, walks, pipe-smoke, elves, merrymaking, baked pies, hairy feet, laughter. I don't know. But you usually have some preconceptions about most things in life and with preconceptions come expectations. Use those. I have prescribed tapping into expectations throughout this book and throughout all the videos on the channel, because it is so powerful.

Unlike stereotypes, expectations are just a bundle of emotional mess. Tell me about a visit to the dentist and I expect horror, pain, and that cold smell of dental rooms. Tell me about a sunset and I expect cold, chilly winds but beautiful colours and warm happy feelings of being with friends. We all expect slightly different things, but we expect a lot of things in common. Especially within the world of role-playing. That is why I love role-playing with people who have never done it before – they don't expect what you expect them to! And that gives you insight into a different expectation.

So, if you see two black daggers carried by dodgy men who die protecting the information about the daggers, what do you expect? Misses Miggins Baked Goods Bake Off? No. You expect clandestine cloak-and-dagger skulduggery. A secret cult. An evil cult. You expect sacrifices, or plots to topple governments. Use that! Let the players expectations guide you. Listen to them. Hopefully, they will talk – I bet this is a secret moon cult who sacrifices custard tarts… nah, this is a demon dagger for opening a portal to the demon realms. I love listening to my players. I learn what they expect and then I see how I can monkey it around.



Don't shoot your Seed too soon, either. The party now has two black daggers and no leads. In another adventure, feel free to have them stumble across a body with a black dagger sticking out of its back. The figure turns out to be a necromancer. What?! That's interesting. We still do not have a clue about this black dagger nonsense. But the necromancer felt like a good red herring to throw in. How can the black daggers now be a bad cult if they kill necromancers? Easy. The necromancer was a traitor. Or was she?

I usually let a Seed flourish for two or three adventures before tipping it as a big adventure. Sometimes I link the Seed to the Master Plot. I know how that plot is running, so it is easy. The Empress has a group of loyalists known as the Black Blades. They are helping to bring her back to life and killing anyone who gets in their way. Bingo - one side plot adventure based totally on seeds. Dream Seeds can recur time and again in the PC's mind to add details you may want to bring into the Seed to make it stronger.

The joy of Seeds is that if you throw them out and no one cares – all the better. They will care when you bring them back. Of course, the other advantage of Seeds is that you don't necessarily need to bring them back, either. No one will notice. Unless you run a YouTube channel. Then people notice. I need to take better notes.

Finally, just a note about Seeds – you don't need to grow every Seed into an adventure. Some can just be once offs, some can play out in the background of another adventure, and many don't need to go anywhere at all. Don't think that just because you planted it you need to care for it. These are all just options for you to draw from later if you need them.

In "The Adventures of the Windswift", my players in Season One encountered a dead drow who had with him a sword and a ring of particular value. Instead of looting it, they took the items and kept them safe. They wanted to return them to his family. A noble cause, to be sure. Two seasons later and I offer my PCs a plot in the Underdark. Totally voluntary. However, I knew about the Seed and so made it seem like an offer too good to be passed up – go to the Underdark, play my adventure and get to delivering those heirlooms you've been keeping safe.

They have now become embroiled in a nightmare of a political game with the drow judicial system, where standing means more than facts. They're up against a drow Senator who has excellent standing, whereas they have little. This ring and sword that has been returned will now come back to help them, as the owners will vouch for the party as being good and honourable. This should help them win their case. As it turned out, the players chose not to get involved in the case, and solved it in a much better way! If you go and watch Season Four of the Windswift, you can see how it played out!

The ring and sword were Seeded when I had no real plan to get them into the Underdark. I just knew they needed to get there because I'm in the building phase of my Master Plot. The ring and sword were Seeds or loot treasure for the party. They became Seeds when one of the players had their PC declare that the items would be returned to the Underdark and their family.

It created a wonderful side story which ended up rewarding the players for their very good actions and concluded an adventure which was critical to the Master Plot playing out.



Upon reflection, Washgust, mage of the Barost Circle, decided keeping it was a bad idea.

NPCS

Oh, NPC! I see thee. Methinks unto mine own self: 'tis an elf on a shelf. NPCs are a phenomenal device that the Great Game Master should make use of. They are a direct mouthpiece from the Master Plot to the Player, via the character's interactions.

How they behave as a mouthpiece is what makes each NPC that much more interesting. How each NPC interacts with the characters is different and can make or break a game. And so, we must focus on helping our NPCs be the best that they can be. Broadly speaking, NPCs can be broken into two categories: Plotters and Fodder.

'Plotters' are the special NPCs. The Henchmen, the Villains, the Mentors, the Guides, the Lovers, the Friends of the PCs' universe. Generally, we want players to grow to like these NPCs, or respect them, or hate them, but we hope for some connection and emotional response.

'Fodder' NPCs are for the characters to interact with on a short-term basis. These are merchants, shopkeepers, helpers and the majority of the inhabitants of your world. They include minions who attack the PCs. They serve mainly a mechanical purpose of being an obstacle, but can still act as mouthpieces of the Master Plot, even if it is just because of the colour of their capes, the type of sword they hold, or the name they scream as they charge into battle. They don't really have much function other than to provide the characters with titbits of information, equipment and maybe an adventure.

Fodder NPCs can grow into Plotters. Plotters shouldn't ever become Fodder NPCs.

I will deal with Fodder NPCs first.

Fodder NPCs

Essentially, these are one-off Adventure NPCs who need only a few things:

A Name, A Job, A Goal, and a Use.

Once the PCs have killed them, they need Equipment, but that should be informed by the first three things anyway. Finally, they need a Quirk, which includes things like visual appearance, accents and so on.

A Name

Names should feel like they belong to the setting. I write down ten names before I even start a session. That way, I have a name for the NPC on the fly and don't need to resort to silly names. It does still happen sometimes. Fodder NPCs don't need clever names. Don't waste your time on them.

A Job

Homeless beggar is a job. Giving the NPC a job – and it could be "attack the PCs to get their gold", or kill them, or follow orders – gives them direction. It helps you with their dialogue. It builds expectation in the minds of the players. Look – what comes to mind if I say:

"You see a Starship Captain at the bar?" You have images of a starship captain. Where is her ship? You suspect the captain could talk about star charts, alien ships, and the latest pirate raids.

If I say: "You see an old washerwoman standing next to the bar," you don't have the same thoughts. She is not going to talk about alien ships. She is going to talk about her aching back, how little she is paid, and possibly her life as a pole dancer. I didn't say you had to keep it boring. So, dialogue is made easier because you know what is expected to come out of the NPCs mouth.



A Goal
This is not the same as a Henchman, Villain, or Nemesis. The NPC will not sacrifice their third son on a full moon to attain their goal. They'll probably put in as little effort as needed to get their goal and abandon ship as soon as it gets tough. NPCs do not stand around waiting for PCs to walk up to them and talk to them. They have lives, and we need to make it appear as if they have one in our world, too. So, giving them a goal lets you work out their dialogue easily. The goal could be: get a drink, find lunch, convince the farmhand to go on a date, write a dictionary of esoteric terms, your imagination can go wild. Couple the goal with the job and the dialogue writes itself.

A Use
Sometimes the NPCs use is to fill in a scene. Some NPCs are just there because we expect them to be there. A space-port? We expect a bartender, a porter, a ticket seller, a scumbag, a few captains. Village? Where is the blacksmith? The sheriff? The baker? The farmer?

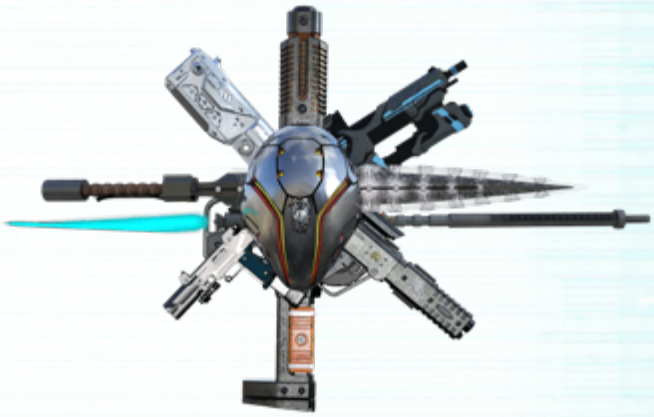
Other times, the NPC has a specific use – deliver a message to the PCs, attack the PCs, be attacked in front of the PCs. These may get a few more moments of thought, but not much. We might prepare some clues as to where they came from, who killed them, etc. But the players will be prompting you and you can Seed on the fly, or refer to whatever outcome you need for this adventure, and add it into the NPCs space.

Mixing up the Goal and the Job is often fun. A washerwoman whose goal is to become a pole dancer is quite funny. Not all need to be as zany as that, but every now and again you can do it, and that brings life to your world. Our planet is full of people who are awesome and have stories like this.

Equipment
Do you see now why knowing these other things is relevant for the first moment of encounter with the NPC, whilst Equipment can be added on as the PCs search the person? If they are here for a drink at the bar, they won't be in full plate-mail armour. If they are, that is suspicious. If they are going shopping, they might have a bag or some extra coins. Maybe a shopping list. I find that, by making the equipment last, it requires very little effort.

Quirk
Now, when presenting these Fodder NPCs you can, if you're quick, throw in a description of value. Normal descriptions are simple – a large woman with blond hair and a messy apron. Descriptions of value might be in their accent – the way you talk when impersonating them – it could be a scar, a limp, something remarkable. Make a note of it, you will need to remember it later if the PCs ever return to this NPC. It is a little bit of flavour and nothing more. I would not prepare beyond this point.

If the PCs persist in talking to the NPC about their history and their life, just let your mouth move and see what kind of on-the-fly history you can invent. Go mad. These NPCs are not designed for long term. Seed the hell out of the sentence. You are in free-form mode. Have fun.



NAME

JOB	
GOAL	
USE	

QUIRK	EQUIPMENT

DID YOU SEED ANYTHING WITH THIS NPC?

FODDER NPC CARD

You truly don't need more than this for your NPCs who are in and out of the world. You fill in the various sections, as per your notes, and only if this NPC Seeds something – like throws out a random name or a something, do you note it down. PCs might, and Seeding requires you keep notes! Now we move onto the more interesting NPCs. The Plotters.

Plotter NPCs

We have discussed at length Henchmen, Villains and the Nemesis, so I'll skip detailing them here. There are five other types of Plotters that we do need to consider most carefully if we are to control our plots. These are:

Guide
Advancer
Mentor
Long-Term
Supporter

The Guide
These NPCs are here for direction of the PCs towards a plot outcome that we need the PCs to get. Think of them as sources of direction.

They can be literally anyone or anything: a computer AI, an old field sergeant who drinks in a bar. When they talk to the PCs, they provide a direction that the PCs may not know about. They can also provide a direction the PCs know about – it reinforces it. But they give a direction. Not a solution. Not a hint. Just a direction.

Meet Nanrook an Icilf – an alien species known for their home planet and surrounding ice nebula. Nanrook has joined the PCs as a mercenary. The PCs are debating how best to approach the Nemesis asteroid. You can see they are going in circles. Nanrook steps forward: "If I may, my people are excellent navigators when it comes to dangerous space obstacles – our home nebula is ice. If you want my advice,fly through the asteroid field, not around it. That will take too much time, and is less likely to be as well guarded." Let the players choose to follow his guidance or not. He cannot tell them how to disable the sensor nets, or if there even are sensors out there. He is a guide, and that is his job.

The Advancer
This is an NPC who has the power to push the plot forward. A ranking officer, a noble, a wealthy merchant – someone who can walk up to the PCs and demand they act, and offer them a reward for doing so. They advance the story because they entice the PCs to action. They don't help much other than doing that.

Meet Lieutenant Tye – airship 1st officer to the Windswift. She is efficient. The PCs – the captains of the ship – need to get the ship from point A to point B. I could make them roll and fly and slowly get from point A to point B, or simply have Lieutenant Tye do it. She does it. Any issues, she reports to the captains, but doesn't take much action other than keeping the ship safe.

The Mentor
This is the one who gives the PCs clues and insight. Ever had your PCs stuck? They don't know how to proceed? Or are they going in completely the wrong direction? The Mentor will pull them back and offer an alternative. Whether the players choose to take it or not is up to the PCs. Unlike a Guide, the Mentor doesn't know the direction, but has a piece of sage advice, wisdom, or lore that will help the PCs to see the light.

Meet Gary. Gary is a cross-dressing drag queen, a vampire, and runs a small café in downtown New York. It is in the middle of the Adventure and our vampire-hunting heroes are stuck. They can't figure out how to catch a vampire killer who has been slowly culling the ranks. Gary – whilst serving them all a tall Sunrise Deathstrike: "You know, if I was a vamp killer, I'd hide where no fanger could touch me. I'd hide in the Solarium – you know, the one on top of the Chrysler builder? Plenty of sun. You wouldn't catch my cute ass anywhere near that place." Gary just gave an option. Now you want to make it so that the players don't just rely on Gary all the time, so when they arrive they discover that the Solarium on top of the Chrysler building is empty, but it was once used by the Vampire Killer. And that leads on to the next point in your adventure.

The Long-Term
These are NPCs that you will use against the PCs at some stage, and are there to act as flavour. The butler who doesn't actively help in a narrative sense and who does their duty and gets on with it. These NPCs are around and are always willing to talk and help, even if they don't do much other than mirror the thoughts of the PCs. They are here to make the PCs home feel like home, and to make the world feel alive.

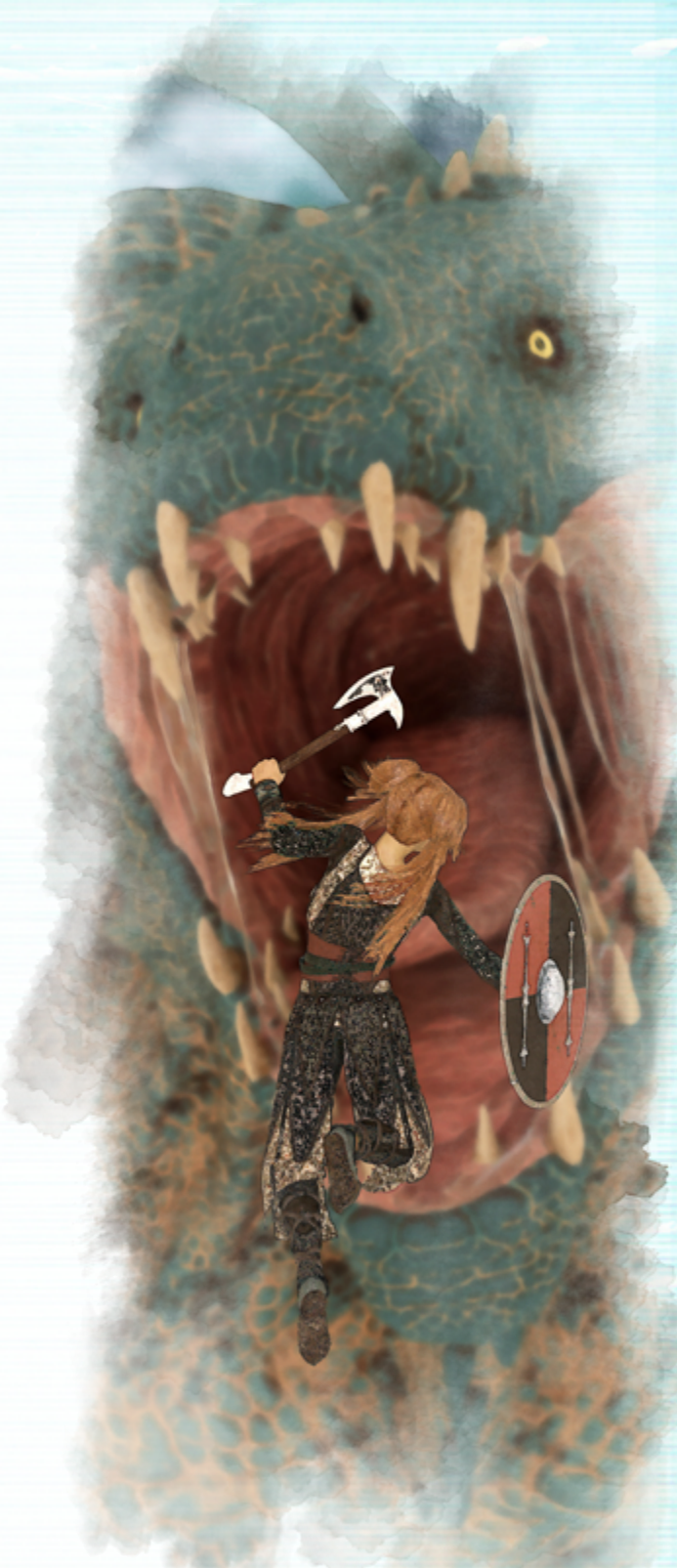


Meet Holly. She's a halfling doctor, and a good one. She doesn't have much insight on anything outside of her own history or medical training, but she'll fix up anyone who walks in her door, and will listen sympathetically to anyone who might want a chat. Outside of the hospital, she plays cards with her grandkids, bakes delicious apple pies, and always has a kind word for the PCs. Her home is theirs to make use of, and they will never go hungry. Healing the soul is just as important as healing the body.

Supporter
This is the NPC who cheers on the PCs regardless of what the PCs are doing. The lover, the wife, the husband, the bard – whatever their job within the world is, they support the PCs 100%. They can't help much other than to be there and to sing the praises of the PCs. I often use these to boost morale. Until I have the Supporter abducted by the villain.

Meet Axel – a college jock who is rather useless off the sports field. But it's 1925 and money is tight. He helps the PCs by basically being madly in love with them. He will do anything for her, such as go and find basic information, collect stuff, and just hang out. Everything the PCs do, Axel will support and cheer on, and if they're down or depressed, The Ax comes out – a goofy clown type of performance that he gives to make them feel better again. He can't shoot, can't drive, and faints at the sight of blood, but he really does support the team.

Each of these NPCs need not be permanent and can be on an adventure-by-adventure basis, except for the Mentor and the Long-Term NPC. They are in it for the long haul.



Frodelheim launched herself into Droganwalder's open mouth...

Desire
The NPCs should have a desire. This is different from a Goal, which is purely functional, to give them a sense of reality in your world. Their Desire should be personal. They want to help the PCs because… is usually a good way to kick-start your thinking.

But their Desire to help the PCs shouldn't be superficial. They should believe in, defend, and support the PCs. That doesn't mean they don't disagree. Remember you can support someone but disagree with their actions.

The Desire should also be for self. It gives them a little something extra. Is it to see their children one last time before they die? Or to grow potatoes? Perhaps it is to be loved.

Fear
Giving the NPCs something, or many things, they fear is equally as beneficial in the long term. It makes them feel more rounded, gives them a personality and lets the players discover personal information from the NPC rather than just facts or information related to the game plot. It makes them feel real. The Fears could be rational, or irrational, and may be advanced or minor.

What both of these - Fear and Desire - do beyond Job, Goal, Use and Name is to make us believe in these figures of our imaginations and buy into their story. We want to be part of their space. And we want to help them. Ultimately, this is where you want to get to. The Players should want to help the NPC as if the NPC was just part of the family.

Get that right and you have your players right where you want them – ready to follow another plot adventure because you've threatened an NPC.



Now – what about history? The history of the NPC. It is important. Yes. Is it needed to be done right now? No. Let it evolve and expand as you need it to. Flexibility allows for compatibility. If we fix their history, we potentially rob ourselves of future adventures. When I meet people whom I am going to spend time with, I don't shake their hands and begin telling them my 37-year history. They discover it slowly, through dialogue and over wine.

Cool Ideas
There is no way to include a chapter on making NPCs and not include the 'cool' factor. Find an image of a cool looking character – add them in as a NPC. Use the cool factor to describe them. *Gandalf* almost single-handedly set the tone for all wizards by being the epitome of cool. But he was more than that, he was wrong, which made us like him even more. Here is why:

Factors that make us like NPCs

There are three – **Competence, Likeability, Proactivity**. *Brandon Sanderson* talks about these as contributing to us liking or not liking someone. In my opinion, this is an excellent short-hand for us to use for our NPCs, because it leads to helping us with dialogue, with motivation, with action, and with creating a believable NPC.

Competence
A highly competent individual is someone we admire. They know their business and get on with the job. A hunter knows how to track game, bring it down, and prepare it. A competent thief knows how to get in, get out and sell whatever was gotten.

I think of competent NPCs as magical items. They can do stuff for the PCs in games that makes life awesome.

If the PCs have a competent blacksmith who hangs around, that's free armour repair, good weapons being made, horses shod etc. That's a real bonus.

Incompetence is equally charming. A thief who bungles every job, drops caltrops around themselves, destroys priceless artefacts and makes away with only a bath towel and some scented soap is adorable. If they have a function, it is to make the PCs feel good about themselves.

Competence can be expressed in action, or in words of advice, or in memory: "Remember when I dropped a vase by mistake…?" etc.

Likability
Oh, this one – it kind of seems redundant. How do you make a likable NPC – make them have high likability. Sadly, it doesn't only work that way. Yes, we will like them, but the other two factors determine how much we will like them over the long term. Likeability is culturally specific, and you and your group will know what is - and what is not - a likable attribute. Do they talk a lot or a little? Do they sing songs? Do they share apples and a smile? Do they pet puppies and help little old ladies across the street? Are they genuine? Do they honestly like helping others?

Someone who does not, who is gruff, mean, and self-centred, isn't likely to be liked… except, we often fall for those gruff, grumpy types. The reason is they often have the other two factors in spades. So, an NPC who swears at the PCs, calls them useless, but still fixes their armour perfectly and builds in a small cigarette holder without being asked, is likely to be liked. We tend to gloss over the rudeness, or the lack of personality and focus on the other attributes. *Dr. House*, from the show *House M.D* is like this. He is not likable. Except he is, because he is competent and takes action.

Proactive
Quite literally, how much is a character willing to do stuff. As humans, we go through periods of intense proactivity and then often just fall into a lull where making coffee is too difficult, so we put it into a pod and let some horrid machine grind away. However, NPCs need to exaggerate these, so that they are a little more apparent and a little more pronounced. This helps the players to quickly identify where these NPCs sit on the proactivity scale and make use of them as they need to.

A proactive NPC is someone who is willing to do stuff. A Guide or Mentor who is proactive is one who runs to the front and eagerly barks until the PCs follow. A proactive Supporter might cook breakfast for the PCs, in anticipation of them going on a fabulous quest today.

Inactive NPCs are the slow, the bored, the downright lazy and the sloth-like. How do they help the party? By reminding them that, from time to time, it is good to slow down and take stock. Inactive NPCs can still be likeable – think of a friend who doesn't get much done but is funny, witty, or incredibly smart. We still like them, even if they don't do much.

That means that Plotter NPCs are there for you to control the pace of the PCs' decisions, either in speeding it up – and the NPCs are giving useful guidance and help, are removing mundane chores and actions which could turn into very slow scenes or dull side adventures, - or in slowing it down, by being abducted, kidnapped, attacked, or forgetting to do stuff. They are, after all, only human. Except if they're dwarves. Well, you know what I mean.

And so, we have three attributes that can be looked at as contributing to whether we like an NPC or not.



An incompetent, likeable, proactive NPC is someone who wants to get stuff done, but just can't seem to get it right. *Wylie Coyote* is this individual. Never surrender, never say die, always optimistic, never succeeding.

An NPC that is competent, unlikable, and proactive, such as *Professor Snape* from the *Harry Potter* books, is an example of someone who one just cannot help but like.

An NPC that is competent and likable, but is inactive, is the typical supporting cast NPC that fills the world. They do what is needed and no more. It just means they do what they are told and no more. These are reliable background people. The friend at the bar who is always ready with a joke, knows their stuff, but will never leave that bar… that's that NPC.

When two of the three components are missing, we tend to not like the NPC – although the players may still use that NPC from time to time. Competent but unlikable and not proactive – librarians spring to mind, I don't know why – are NPCs who will have very little interaction with the PCs, because the PCs only use them to solve technical issues.

Likable, incompetent, inactive individuals are also treated as a one-stop on the way to more interesting pastures. This really is the useless buddy who may help make the PCs smile from time to time, but offers no more. This isn't a bad thing, it's just a thing.

Incompetent, unlikable, proactive people, such as *Mr. Bean* from the same TV show and films, are there to run at cannons and die. They want to do stuff but can't really pull it off, and we don't care what happens to them really.

Miss all three components and no one will care about that NPC.

Have all three components and you theoretically have the PCs. Be careful with these NPCs that can do it all, though. It raises questions of: "well, why are they not saving the world instead of the PCs?" If the mentor is a better warrior, is proactive, and is charismatic why, in the name of all that is good, is this not the Chosen One?

If the PCs come across these people too often in your world, they may begin to wonder why they bothered showing up. I am a big believer in making my PCs my world heroes, who will ultimately be the most successful beings on the planet. Don't overshadow them with better NPCs. Namely, because it makes your imaginary tool for assisting with the plot better than someone else's whole, imaginary persona.

Plotter NPCs Part 2

It's a little more complex than your Fodder NPC card. The Plotter NPC card really is all that should be done on your NPCs before you start using them. Like undertakers, Plotter NPCs grow their own personalities over time and the more you use them. To this end, I let my Plotter NPCs evolve and grow. Their functions stay the same, but generally I see how they change. It's fun.

Name, Job, Goal, and Use are the same as before. It's their role – are they a Guide, Advancer, Mentor, Long-Term, or Support? A tick works. I have it on the sheet so I can adjust what kind of information I'm giving in a meaningful way. If they are a Mentor, they are not going to prescribe the path the PCs must take, rather how they should take their next decision, for example. Our likeability blocks are next. You can come up with ways to track these if you like – a score from 1 to 10 sometimes works.



NAME

JOB		USE	
GOAL			

LONG-TERM	MENTOR	SUPPORTER	GUIDE	ADVANCER

COMPETENCE	LIKABILITY	PROACTIVITY

WHAT MAKES THEM COOL?	

QUIRK	EQUIPMENT

DESIRE	FEAR

DESCRIPTIVE CHARACTERISTICS

FACIAL FEATURES	SPEECH PATTERNS	BODY TYPE	EQUIPMENT

SIGHT	SOUND	SMELL	TOUCH

EMOTIONAL STATE	HAPPY	SAD	ANGRY

BIOGRAPHY

PLOTTER NPC

DATE

You also need to list what they have as skills in those areas; a competent blacksmith, spy, tailor, pilot etc. What makes them likable? Are they open and friendly, supportive, giving, kind, compassionate, etc? And what are they proactive about? Do they get things ready? Do they clean up afterwards? Do they anticipate needs? Do they suggest solutions? It's up to you.

"What makes them cool" is fairly self-evident. Not all Plotter NPCs need to be cool, just as not all need to be likable either. But your key ones, they should be cool. And cool can be a state of mind, how they do something, maybe their competence. What makes them different from the rest? Quirks you know about, although these are specifically little quirky things for the NPC to have that really makes them different.

Desire and Fear are next, and these just make the NPC feel real and well-rounded. Something to think about and use in conversations and in plotting adventures where this NPC has been taken by the Nemesis.

Seeds – this should be a working document and this should grow as the NPC spews stuff out of their mouths or, more correctly, as you spew stuff out at the PCs. Keep your notes neat!
The second half of the sheet is exactly the same as the Nemesis, Villain, and Henchmen sheet, so I won't bore you with a repeat. Of course, you are looking to make these NPCs (they are your party groupies and supports) fun and engaging so that your players want to engage with them. Remember that.

In the very first episode of the Bacon Battalion – the adventure group that started my online roleplaying recordings – the party came across a woman during a castle battle. They were defending from a far superior enemy who was invading. This woman was there as a Fodder NPC. As the party approached her, she demanded to know if she was going to be ravaged. When they told her no, she complained and demanded a good ravaging. It was a moment of humour and set this NPC into the minds of the players. Later in the season, she can be heard demanding a good ravaging from guards.

In "The Adventures of the Windswift" I am spoilt, as the ship the party owns is full of Plotter NPCs. There is the ever-efficient Lieutenant Tye, who makes sure things happen - she's an Advancer NPC. She has also been on a great story arc, where her competence has been questioned by the captains, as she may have let a Graith spy aboard the ship by accident. This is going to have ramifications in the future, as I now have to keep track of her emotional state at having her competency questioned. There is Jocken Waffenstoke, the ship's engineer. He is exceptionally competent and proactive, but is not likable. He screams and shouts and lies to the party all the time. Meos – the young boy they saved – is growing to be competent, is likeable in his enthusiasm and wonder, and is fairly proactive. But he is 14 and is there to be a Supporter.

On the flipside is the Archon, who is on the party's side yet doesn't seem to be. Why? Because he doesn't seem competent, isn't very likable, and may or may not be proactive – the jury is out on that. As a result, the party could care less about him and, in fact, may be against him soon enough.





If Aric's reflection in the red wine glass hadn't revealed his presence, he would have knocked the Duke out...

NPC Dialogue

I am not going to go into too much depth here because I've touched on it throughout this chapter. Dialogue should not be too difficult to generate on the fly for you now. Why? Well, what constitutes dialogue? What causes you to say stuff in real life? Questions others ask, if you are the quiet type. Anything and everything that floats across your brain, if you're like me. So how do you do that for the NPC? Well, this is what your NPCs have in their heads:

Master Plot information
Adventure information
Their Job information
Their Goal information
Their Fears / Desires information
Their 3 attributes
Seeds
Theme
Expectation
Colour
Local knowledge
Sex

I mean, that is pretty much more stuff than goes through the average living human's mind. Very briefly, because I think you have read so much by now already:

Master Plot Information
This is a "yes or no" question, to begin with. Do the players need more information about the Master Plot? Yes or no? If no, then skip this. If yes, figure out what this NPC can say about what needs to be said. Is it the location of the temple?

"I wouldn't go north now, strange lights seen up there. Dark lights, sir. Ain't no good gonna come of it."

Or perhaps it is that the PCs need rope to cross a chasm and they have not packed any rope.

"Don't suppose you have any rope on you, madam? Only the village is plumb out of rope owing to the fact that's it's all tied up at the moment."

Really, the mind can go in any direction on how to include Master Plot information.

Adventure information
Again, a "yes or no". Do the PCs need more information? Yes or no? If yes, give it to them. Make them work for it – NPCs can be reluctant, can ask for money, can be defensive, or open and friendly.

Their Job information
You know their job. Most people complain about their jobs, and NPCs are most people. Or maybe they want more business from the PCs. They want to sell something, if their job is salesman. This should form the basis of your opening dialogue options. Why? Because I am comfortable talking about my job with strangers. My personal sex life – not so much. Well that's not true either, but I'm a strange cookie. My point is, this is a great place to start.

Their Goal information
You also should have an idea about their goal. This they can confide in the PCs secretly, or openly, or mournfully if they don't think it will happen. This adds depth to the NPC and makes them feel as if they will carry on once the PCs have left the village. And that is the illusion you are trying to create, even though it is absolutely not the case.

For Plotter NPCs, we have all of the above and then we have even more! How wonderful? As a note, try to avoid NPC to NPC dialogue. It gets confusing if you are not really good at accents and have some performance skill.



Their Fears / Desires information
These should be moments of extreme interpersonal communication between the PC and the NPC. This elevates the NPC from being just a Fodder to something more., something a little real. It is always a great way to encourage role-playing. NPCs sharing hopefully encourages PCs sharing. "Share in this circle of trust. No one is judging."

Their 3 attributes
At length, we have discussed this. If they're likable, throw in a joke, a witty statement or a kind word of support and encouragement. Hey, how about a compliment, even? If they're competent, let them go into some detail about their competency field. If they're proactive, have them come up with solutions to problems, offer suggestions, and bring ideas to the table.

Seeds
This is where you get to flex your creativity with total freedom. Throw out a story from the NPC's past. It might have nothing to do with the current adventure. It could literally be a 'one time at band camp' story. Just make note of some of the names and events you mention. It is a Seeding playground, so go mad.

Theme
What is the theme of your Master Plot? Well, you can mention it as NPC dialogue. You need to be fairly subtle. I find that fairy-tales from within the world setting help do this. Or tales from bards at taverns. There really is no limit.

Expectation
What do we expect from the NPC? If the NPC is a big, burly, six-armed alien who rips off people's heads we expect little dialogue, but - perhaps because we have watched "Guardians of the Galaxy" - this giant brute might have a soft-spot or bizarre hobby.

Colour
Unlike Seeds, colour is literally just for flavour. Talk about the weather, the forest in autumn, the current political situation in a distant land.

Local knowledge
Have a titbit of useless information about the local area? Have the NPC throw it out there. This bridge was built during old Mad Mueen's reign. Not too mad, if you ask me. Throw out some useful information that allows your world to breathe a little. Show off a bit of your world setting.

Sex
Depending on your players, the age rating of your game, and how comfortable you are, sex is often on the minds of a lot of people, a lot of the time. Why should NPCs be any different? The NPC barbarian female who travels with the party may sometimes growl at a passing serving wench and claim her passion. These are moments that define the NPC as either being crude, rude, one of the 'lads', civil, decent, or neutered.

Bringing dialogue to life

This is the only part that I think you need to find your own method for, because these are basically social and personal attributes that you, as a human being, need to have in real life. There isn't a roll for being able to make small talk. I'm sure there are books aplenty, and writing down cue cards for yourself is one method that I know of. As far as I'm concerned, if you follow the steps as outlined above, you have your cue cards.

How you bring this to life in your game is difficult to describe. For me, as a Game Master, I imagine the character in my head – I let my mind flit through a thousand images and faces of people I've seen in the past. I choose one.



I throw in a personality – just a general approach to life. They could be happy or sad, neutral, bored, interested. Then I remember what role the NPC is going to play – Fodder or Plotter. From there, I apply all the different cues for dialogue – offering a little bit as freebies in dialogue and waiting for PCs to ask questions. I might have the NPC ask questions back, depending on their role and how I need to the PCs to react. Remember one of the uses of an NPC is to give information or direct the PCs. So, if I need to direct them I keep that at the forefront of my mind.

I also try to remember what the PC looks like. Here is where I can look at stereotypes in my setting. I find it a lot easier to do if my PCs have character portraits that I can see.

Do I forget to include stuff? Yes. Do I use all the items in this book? No. I don't need to. The world is full of NPCs. Forget to mention there is a bounty on the PCs heads? Next NPC, next dialogue, it can come out. Still forget? Throw a poster on the wall as they're leaving the star-port. You have an entire universe to work with, don't get stuck on making each moment perfect.

Use your voice; for me, it is just me pretending to be someone I am not, and not caring what my players think. I've been accused of being a ham-actor, a bad actor, a terrible actor, a cringe-worthy, dull performer. Not once, multiple times, and not in my past. Go look at the videos on YouTube – there are regular people who find my 'performance' as a Game Master laughable, insane, stupid, or childish. Good for them. I have plenty of players who do not, and who love it, and enjoy my antics as much as I do. My point is to do what brings you joy, helps you bring the NPC to life, and that keeps your players coming back for more.

There are many ways to bring out the voice – it might be in the form of copious notes, reference cards, or just pretending to be someone you are not. You need to find a system that works. What you definitely need to do, however, is to fix the information the NPC has available to them in a logical manner.

So, dialogue is a balancing act of information delivery, random stuff, you saying words that hopefully are tempered by a healthy dose of expectations, and then fixing it as you go.

In Season Two of "The Adventures of the Windswift", the party met a desert trader. This man would sell his own mother for a few coins if he could. He had a singular goal: sell his junk to the party. I channelled my inner car-salesman and tried to sell stuff. The party was not interested. I reasoned that this man's goal was to make a deal, to sell. If the party would not buy, what else? His use in the adventure was to give information and help the party move forward, get out of the desert and carry on with the adventure, so I couldn't have him just leave. He needed another angle. Something else to leverage and sell.

He worked out (I worked out) that the party may need information and support. He also worked out the party could open up a world of trade for him. So, he helped out. They took his sand-ship, they got him mixed up with blood-thirsty Darahags, and eventually got him politically connected with the leader of the Darahags in a most intimate way. In the end he got his trade deal, the party got what they needed, and they left the desert.

By returning to the purpose of the NPC, to your theme, and in looking at the goal of the NPC, I could make him sound believable and respond in a manner that I felt seemed appropriate. I bet if the party ever returns to the desert, he will be the first one they call upon.





The shot missed everything vital, but did set off the fire alarm...

Beginning

Why is this last? Because you need to know all the other stuff first! This is the moment that you have been dreading the whole week – beginning your new campaign. It's a make-or-break moment.

When you launch a campaign, if you have a Session Zero as is so often prescribed by so many GM's out there, you have a chance to test your campaign a little. At these, your theme can be tested. If you don't, and you just plunge in, know that your players are equally nervous. They are wondering if this is really the character they want to play. Is this the build they like? If you have great role players, they're trying to find the character's voice and attitude. And they are worried that this voice might be wrong, or the attitude abrasive.

You are worried that they won't like the campaign or won't buy into it. Well you can, of course, ask your players beforehand what type of game they want, what setting, and tone etc. and they'll have answered – "mostly a bit of everything". So my advice is to launch big. Again – and I may have mentioned this before - I have been accused of always running epic games. Never intimate single, little stories. Proudly, I say yes. Yes, that is me! I do epic. I can't help myself. I like my players to be heroes.

The other challenge is bringing the party together. This is often a complete disaster, especially if you have players who are too focused on roleplaying the idiot they've created, rather than on working as a group – which they are, as players, so why make their PCs difficult?



I don't get it. Anyway, I've worked out a few methods of bulldozing over it. But it is something that you need to be aware of – how to bring them together and then keep them together.

However, once you have decided on your Master Plot, you know at least where you are going. You have several introduction adventures available to you to start your game. But how to choose which one? How to design that adventure so the players are left breathless?

Beginning with the beginning

Here are some of the ways I've started campaigns to great success:

Gigantic Battle Sequence
Start with a massive combat. Not a bar fight. We save that for later. But something truly spectacular. It should fit with your theme, but not your master plot, unless it makes sense. The PCs are in a small huddle as the game opens, and its enemies everywhere. They are forced to work together to survive. If they try to split up, have large groups of heavily armed enemies block their path.

They need to discover during this combat who is causing this massive battle, and they need to find a way to stop them. Or at the very least, to cause significant trauma to force a withdrawal of troops.

I like this kind of opening because it forces teamwork. There is no chance for PCs to not work together, and it puts them in a difficult situation, opens with a ton of questions – who is attacking, why, what do they want, how do we stop this, can we survive, where are we, why are we here etc? You can establish a few key players and make us feel as if the world has been running for years before we started to play in it.

Common backstory
A great method for roleplaying fans is this common backstory. This is a much more integrated approach to character creation and involvement in the story. You have to be part of the character creation process with the players. In other games, you let the players have a fairly free hand when writing their biographies. In this method, you force – yes, force – them to write themselves a group of people who know one another or who work with one another.

Railroading their backstories to fit isn't as bad as it seems, especially if your game has a mission-based focus – like a starship setting or modern setting where the players all work together daily. It makes sense they know one another. I've included two tables here that can help with the creative process and make the relationships feel a little more fun than railroading.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDER

A	STATUS	B	STATUS	C	STATUS
1	EMPLOYER/ EMPLOYEE	1	DISTANT RELATIVES	1	SECRETLY IN LOVE
2	CHILDHOOD FRIENDS	2	BROTHER/ SISTER	2	SHARE DEADLY SECRET
3	POLITICAL ALLIES	3	GUILD BROTHERS	3	LOVERS
4	CO-WORKERS	4	UNCLE/AUNT	4	SACRED OATHS
5	SECRET CULT	5	STEP-SISTER/ BROTHER	5	MOTHER/ FATHER
6	NEIGHBOURS	6	HATED RIVALS	6	BEST FRIENDS
7	TRAINED TOGETHER	7	COUSINS	7	SOLE SURVIVORS
8	COMPANIONS IN ARMS	8	FRIEND OF A FRIEND	8	HUSBAND/WIFE
9	FRIENDLY RIVALS	9	BROTHER-IN-LAW SISTER-IN-LAW	9	KISSING COUSINS
10	CELL MATES FROM PRISON	10	BRAINS/ BRAWN	10	ROLL TWICE

Column A is for players who are not comfortable with more intimate or roleplay-heavy relationships. Column B lists slightly more complex relationships that can lead to interesting role-play, situations whilst column C is for advanced players who love to push their own boundaries. Interpret the relationships as you see fit.

Start with the player on your left. The player on their left is the 'connection' pair. Both players must agree upon which column to roll on from the Relationship Builder table, after deciding how far they want to push their roleplaying experience. The first player rolls a ten-sided die. That is their character's relationship to he paired character.

Then, have them roll a twelve-sided die and consult the Attitude table to determine how their character feels about that person. Just because the characters are Companions in Arms gives them a common history, however, they might not like one another, or they may respect one another. Continue to work around the room until every player character has a relationship and emotional connection to every other character in the group. The results are often very interesting. You can, of course, develop your own tables and charts and this is just an example of how to make it interesting.

Another variant is to have one character act as the pivot - and only roll connections between that character and the other characters, not all characters. *Gandalf* from the *Lord of the Rings* was such a character - he had links to everyone, but not everyone had links to each other.

This method can be slow, but the first adventure can now be anything you choose. The team is established and rearing to go. The team also has reasons to stay together. My advice in this case is to launch your first adventure that links directly into the Master Plot.

The other benefit, of course, is that you can much more easily make the Master Plot feel like it's tailored for the group. The group is tailored for your game, so it makes sense.

Attitude

Roll	Status
1	Envy
2	Distrust
3	Fondness
4	Love
5	Lust
6	Happiness
7	Respect
8	Indifferent
9	Scorn
10	Despair
11	Fear
12	Joy



Awkward Inn
You start in a tavern and let the players discover what their PCs should be doing. **Avoid.** Good players will have their PCs search for plot. They'll talk to everyone and read every poster on the wall in a desperate attempt to find the start of the game. This forces them to think outside of the game as they try to help you start your campaign. Bad players will have their PCs drink a beer, and then leave. Where does that leave you? With a damp opening that no one will remember. It sets a tone of "this campaign is going to require you to do a lot of outside game work, 'cause I, as the GM, have not done it."

Common problem
Here it is. The Common Problem is a situation that the PCs start in and have to help one another get out of to survive. It could be an inn or tavern. It could be a bar-fight. It could be a crazy madman who takes the tavern hostage. But you start with it. You open with it. Not with four hours of inn waffle. Jump in as the knife is drawn, as the fire explodes, as the lift jams.

PCs could be in a tavern, they could all be in prison, aboard a sinking ship, adrift in space with no oxygen. It places them all in a difficult spot – like gigantic combat – but unlike the gigantic combat opening, this is a roleplaying and problem-solving scenario and situation. Depending on your players, you may decide which is more appropriate.

Pre-game game
Sometimes called Session Zero, this is the game that runs and allows everyone the chance to explore their characters. There is no pressure, no sense of campaign, just a fun little adventure involving a combat, some role-playing, a puzzle or riddle, and maybe a second combat.

What this does is allow a natural friendship to happen between the PCs. It puts the PCs into one another's space. It allows the players to see how their PCs are working, and gets everyone comfortable with the world. This then allows you to relax. The next session is the first adventure, which can be plot based or not, but here there is no pressure and everyone can slide into the game.

The prologue – the cut-away sequence
Before we start – use this sparingly. It can be wonderful fun and really give the players a sense that you are a Game Master on the edge. It can get boring really quickly and can result in severe meta-gaming if your players are not used to separating player knowledge from character knowledge. What it is, now that you've been suitably warned, is this: you give the players a different character in the first session. They side down ready to begin with their characters and you give them new ones. These are minions involved in an action on behalf of your Master Plot - getting something, perhaps, or keeping something that has been gotten.

You intentionally set the adventure to fail. The characters will die at the end. They don't even need to succeed. It is just a different way to open the game. Now, what they are trying to do should be made clear at the onset: get the princess to the dark tower, slay the dragon in the sewers. The quest should be fun. It serves the function of letting the players know there is a situation happening somewhere, and when you then have their real characters stumble across – in Session Two – the same ruined wagon that in Session One they'd accidently destroyed as incompetent minions, they will smile and have an idea of what is about to come.



Of course, you make sure to change it up – develop the plot from where the players left off. If the minions were supposed to get the princess to the dark tower, and through the antics of the adventure she escapes into the woods, Session Two should start with said princess running into the players' actual PCs.

The Flash-Forward – a future that will come to pass

Michael Kesevan gave me this one and I love it. Giant warning – it creates a huge amount of meta-game paradoxes, so only use with skilled players who can separate player and character knowledge and who also want to make the story work!

What you do is start the game in the middle of the adventure. The PCs are doing something dangerous. You run the scenes until you reach a cliffhanger moment. Then you roll back to 10 days before…

...And start the adventure again, only 10 days earlier. It's wonderfully fresh and a little like the Prologue, but at the same time different. It's risky, as I've said – you need players who will realize what you are doing and go with it. Because of what now has to happen, as the adventure unfolds, the players are aware of how the session began and will need to get their characters back to that situation again. They also need to make sure they don't plan for events that they know are coming up – because they went through them already in the opening of the game. Like all time-travel issues, you must play it carefully. This is Seeding in reverse.

I loved it. Thankfully, we were a great bunch of players who accepted it and made sure our PCs chose the right paths to get us back to the beginning of the flashback, before we went back in the past to the present. Got it?

If you watch Episode One of the "Bacon Battalion" Season One, you'll see I started with a massive battle. I had just finished making the video about avoiding taverns as your starting point – so I intentionally started the party in a tavern and almost immediately blew it up. In the "Adventures of the Windswift", our opening is a mock battle that suddenly and dramatically takes a turn for the worse when one of the ships explodes. This throws the party into a situational position that forces them to work together.

When I introduced the new players in Season Four, I had them sneaking into a cave and discovering a dragon, which promptly ate them. When the game resumes and time has been corrected, the party might not remember being eaten by a dragon, but the players do and it's forged a common background – even if it is on the meta-level.

In my one-on-one game, my player's character merely had to get a box from a wagon...A wagon owned by a super assassin who ends up using the character as a means to deliver a body to the head of the church, and is then assassinated. It was purely a game of the mind – very little combat happened, and the character never even met the assassin. It has subsequently become one of his character's goals to hunt down this assassin – an emergent adventure if ever there was one.





It wasn't the last assassination attempt on the Empresses life, but it was his...

Ending

You started your campaign on shaky legs, you played your heart out as the Plotter NPC who died for the party, and now all that remains is the final adventure in your Master Plot. A year, two years, more have slipped past. This is it. Mess it up and you're going to feel miserable. No pressure. So how do we make sure our final adventure is amazing? We use the 5 C's.

Coolness factor
Now is the time to bring out your most crazy locations. The geography must be cool, the weather must be spectacular, the environment must be charged. The final showdown needs to be a showdown of the entire world. In this book we've referenced lava, volcanos, massive fortresses, space nebulae, star-ports and I don't know what else. The end should feature it all. A massive space-fortress in a nebula with a star that is about to go nova and blow super-hot gas everywhere. And the PCs are in the middle of it.

Do not sell yourself short here. Think about what is cool – then add more. Minimalism is not cool. It's intellectually appealing. Fireworks are cool – silent ones, please.

Chaos and Calm
Gigantic battles, titanic explosions, and a hurricane of fury all surround a central eye of calm. In that calm – the PCs and the Nemesis. The PCs have fought through the chaos. It is still going on around them, but not at the centre. At the centre is the Nemesis. Mixing up moments of calm into the chaos is truly awesome. The NPCs who have helped the PCs must be involved in this chaos. Their deaths happen in the calm. A moment of quiet reflection: "we had some good times… arrggh." Punctuating the carnage is what we love.

Contingency
Split the party into multiple groups and give each group a vital function that must happen if the end is to be achieved. Just having a giant group of PCs beat down on the Nemesis is rather dull. Then it's just a dice-rolling slog-fest. By giving the PCs multiple objectives that, when solved, lead to more critical objectives builds the tension and makes each outcome a knife-edge situation.

Catastrophic Consequences
Failure here doesn't mean the party gets a regroup and do over next week. This is it. If the Nemesis wins, the game is over, roll new characters. That is what the stakes should be. Anything less and you're not selling your campaign, the players are not going to be rolling everything they possibly can. Make it clear this is an all-or-nothing outcome.

Climax
As odd as it sounds, this is the end of the campaign, it should climax. But how? The climax here refers to tying up all the weird lose plot holes, Seeds, and side stories. You need to link them into this grand ending. Leave one out, one that the players seemed especially curious about but didn't have time to get to. That's for the next campaign. But, onthe whole, you want to finish everything. Now is the time to do it.

Conclude
No "Nemesis Sneaky Escape", no false conclusions. End it. The important moment is knowing when it's over. Players may want to carry on, to wrap it up, or follow a sub-plot that, let's be honest, was a Seed that you had long since forgotten. Do not be tempted to let them do it. It will feel hollow and empty in comparison to your climatic moment, and the last impression of the campaign, is often the impression that players remember most.



All together now

Now all you need to do is realize that all of these have to be present in the last adventure. And remember, the last adventure does not mean that it only needs to be one adventure. It could be a few – closing up the various plot lines, resolving various issues, and bringing it all together. TV shows are often judged on their last season, because that is the season where they wrap up all the threads.

Use all of these and your conclusion will be great, unless you have overpowered your Nemesis and the entire party dies. I didn't invest two years of my life for the party to now die. And I strongly dislike people who let characters die so easily – it's part of the game, they say. Why then did I invest so much time into the game? Why did I bother to create a backstory, or an emotional character arc? Let me know that before I begin, and that the game is just a string of random adventures until the PCs die, and then we start again. Then I can rock up at the table and make stuff up as I go because it has no value at all.

To me - Character death - is the same as players stopping playing half-way through a campaign, because they just rolled a die that said: Play game or change game. It's the most insulting thing I can think of that can be done to a Game Master; to destroy all that has been worked for because of a die roll. People like that probably use clear dice, or special dice that so much detailing you can't tell what the actual number is. Don't be one of those people...

Rant over.

Post Game Comments

So your campaign just ended, and everyone seems to be smiling. Time to ask questions:

What did the players like about the campaign?
What was their favorite moment?
Was there anything they didn't like?
What is next?

I feel these four questions give you guidance to improve yourself, but also allow for open dialogue; the pressure is off and no character death is on the cards - the game is over.

Listen to how the players talk about what they liked. If it was the combat sequences, or the flavour, or the NPCs, whatever it is means it made a real impression upon them. This does not mean that all your other efforts were wasted! Merely that this player liked that aspect. If all the players give you the same answer, then you know you are really strong in that area. You can then ask about areas you may be personally concerned with; to wit, if you are worried about your NPCs, or your plotting.

I would also suggest using a chat program to ask these questions privately to your players. That way there is no sheep answer, it is individual answers. By the by, you should also ask these questions of yourself, and answer as openly as you can.

Jot down the answers for each player and yourself and reflect upon the outcome. If you truly want to improve, look at areas that were not mentioned, and see if in your next campaign you can improve.

The What is next question is the only leading question designed to inflate your ego. If they all say - we play your next campaign - you are golden. Well done.



If someone else wants to try, you should encourage, support, and help them. Do not run off thinking they hated your game. You have done such a remarkable job that you have inspired someone else to don the mantle of GM, and that is truly awesome, as we don't have enough good GMs out there.

If of course, they never let you GM again, you may need to do some introspection. DO NOT STOP however. Go online and run another group. Only after six campaign conclusions where not one of your players wants you to run another campaign, should you consider working on your player character building skills, sometimes people are just not cut out to be Game Masters, but are the most wonderful players. Is that like killing a character based on a die roll? I hope not, it's genetics baby. Damn. It is a die roll. Curse you universe!

So what now? Well, you are either creating a character, or, and this is my hope, and the goal of the book, already planning your next Sentence and just how you are going to make the PCs lives a living hell...



When the Green-Boyz gang rode into town,
it was always going to be trouble!

The World Anvil

www.Worldanvil.com is our longest running and closest ally. The website is a World Setting Aggregator and so much more. We have worked with them to bring you a remarkable tool that supplements this book.

All the tables in this book can be found on WorldAnvil.com. This means that you can design your campaign using the book as a guide, include all your mad schemes, and then continue to work on your world setting and your active game all in one website.

If you want to know more, watch the *How to be a Great GM* channel for videos on how this all integrates, or head on over to Worldanvil.com or their YouTube space under the same name for detailed technical use videos.

Of course, you don't have to use Worldanvil.com if you don't want to. Scraps of paper randomly laying around your house with cryptic notes that don't cross link to one another, that prompt for nothing, and that offer you zero support both creatively or technically, may just be the way you want to go, and that is fine. :p

If, on the other hand, you want all your campaign content searchable and easy to cross-reference; if you want to get a handle on your timelines, make your maps link to the planning you've done for your campaign, or to other maps; if you want your players' characters sheets in front of you and your music and pictures pinned to your Digital Storyteller's Screen, then maybe World Anvil is for you.

I've already unpacked their wonderful world-building templates on my *How to be a Great GM* channel. Each one prompts you to think of elements of your world setting you might normally forget. And their cross-referencing system works like a Twitter mention, @ and then three letters. Bingo - the Master Plot now has a link to a longer article about the Empress Ilianna, including a picture, some mood music, and more links to each of the dark dukes. It's easy. And it makes your job as a Great GM easier.

And the maps feature is another godsend. Yours truly actually helped with the latest design of that. You can drop pins in (like Google Maps), and those pins can link to text you've written about your world, such as description of your cities or races, or to other maps - like dungeon maps. You can move those pins around, too, so that when your "Make Plotter" players run off north, you can just move the pin. Ha! Now the dungeon is north, too. You can get an excellent overview of your map as well, because when you click on pins the information pops up on the left side of the view screen, next to the map.

And, well, if that wasn't enough, it has plenty more DnD features as well. How about their Digital GM Screen? That helps you keep track of your Master Plot and Adventure phases, you can note down anything you Seed off the cuff during play, pin music and images to it so you have them on hand and can share them digitally with your players (which means you don't need to send your players out for a snack break while you try and find that damn piece of paper) and you can even see your players' character sheets - so you can judge an Adventure on the Fly and make it harder or easier, depending on their current arsenal.

You can get your players to write journals after the session as well, which gives you even more information about their expectations going forward, and whether they've cottoned on to the clues you've Seeded for the Master Plot. And you can write your own session reports, too. That'll help you keep track of what you've Seeded, and how you've established links between Seeds, so that when you come to the final session you can wrap everything up neatly. Like the Great GM you are. World Anvil helps you store everything, and connects it all together. It is a Great tool for a Great GM… which of course, having read my book, you are now, too.



The campaign notes were all prepped, this was going to be the best game of Office Blocks & Managers, 5th edition ever!


"It wants the Diablo Fire?"
"Nope, she's drunk, and we're leaving."

Conclusion

Hit that like button… sorry. Force of habit. We run games for many reasons. I run games to participate in amazing stories and to see my players enjoy spending time in a world that I've co-created with them. We each have different reasons for playing these Role-Playing games. This book is how I approach just one aspect of the game – the campaign part. There is much more we can look at - nuances, characters, settings, and the like. For me, getting the plot right is vital.

I hope that you look at the advice offered in this book and see if it is applicable to your game, your players, and your style. I may be too improvisational for you. I may be too formulaic for you. You might prefer to feel out the beats of your adventure, rather than have a 121 plan. That is great, and I admire people who can do that.

What I do hope is that the ideas here may inspire your own. What I declare as black and white, you may personally feel has ignored the grey. I encourage you to challenge everything I've said in this book. Turn it on its head, throw it out, rewrite it. Use it as a guide of what not to do. I'm opinionated, arrogant, and demanding. I am also dedicated to telling a great story with my players and if that requires me to have those attributes, then so be it.

Others are rules-lawyers, number hackers, and dice whores. That is their game. And I would hope that somewhere in this book there is some advice that was useful to them.

We all owe it to ourselves to find groups that we fit into, that appreciate our approach to role-playing and that understand our reasons for playing in the first place.

Running a game may seem like an impossible challenge. Too much to take in. Too much to handle. At first glance it can be. That is why I've broken this book down into the various chapters – hopefully proving that each step is fairly simple if you know which step you could take. Once you've built up a lot of steps, you suddenly have a campaign and can run a game.

With so many online resources available, World Anvil. Dungeon Fog, and my own, there is no excuse not to start running your own game.

I want to leave you with these parting words that were said to me by a Game Master at the very first convention I ever attended as a young man of 14 – well, I could hardly attend it as a young woman of 14, could I?

"You shouldn't roleplay ever again, you don't know how to play properly."

I was mortified. This was said to me in front of my friends who I role-played with regularly. They all heard this convention-level Game Master say it. He wasn't referring to the rules. As we were walking away from the hall, one of my friends said quietly to me:

"Well, I hope you don't listen to him, I love playing in our games."

And I didn't.

And my players still do.





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