Instant GM
A Bag of Tricks



by Ramsey "Tome Wyrm" Lundock

Edited by Wayne Tonjes

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Introduction

The players have to constantly adlib and adapt to plot developments. If they become overwhelmed, it is "in character" to stop and discuss the situation with each other. The Game Master on the other hand has no confidants. He is expected to react instantly to what the players describe their characters doing.

The typical GM spends hours preparing before a game; planning for everything the characters might try. But no matter how much you prepare, the only sure bet is that the players will think of something you didn't. In fact the more material you prepare, the more likely it is that one of the players will latch on to an incidental detail and take off in an unexpected direction faster than you can say "Red Herring."

Every Game Master has his own style. But all of them need to be able to think on their feet. Improvising during a game is easier if you are ready to step away from the written game and go in the direction the players want to try. Remember the player characters are the main characters in the story you are telling. By definition the plot is what they do, not what you planned for them. You want to gently guide the group 'back on track' without letting them realize that they ever deviated from the script.

There are three techniques which can improve your improvisation behind the GM screen: Plot Seeds, Stock Characters, and Rakugo Props. (On a personal note: Some of the best games I've ever run, I've shown up at the table armed only with this bag of tricks and no fore planning to get in the way.)



1) Plot Seeds

Plot seeds are generic plots, suitable for any genre. They're no more than a single sentence, often only a phrase, that sums up the goal of the adventure and the type of obstacles separating the heroes from that goal.

Plot seeds are helpful for writing, preparing for, or running a game. They give you an easy way to remind yourself how the adventure is supposed to develop. Keeping the Plot Seed in mind while you write creates an adventure more consistent in tone and pace. Behind the GM screen, the Plot Seed reminds you not only what track to aim the players, but what are the appropriate ways to guide them, so that they make the right decision on their own.

Writing with Plot Seeds

When writing with Plot Seeds, choose one you think your group will enjoy. Next decide how it will work in the genre in which your game is set. The Plot Seed "Kill the Monster" probably means an alien-nasty in a SF game, a bear, alligator, or big cat in a realistic modern setting, and some form of ghoul or ghost for a horror game.

Once you have this in place, think of reasons why the characters would become involved in this type of plot. This gives you a chance to customize to your group if you know them very well: a rogue who would never lift a finger to save a princess from the space pirates, might leap into action if it's his girlfriend or younger sister who was taken to the secret asteroid base. Both scenarios are still the Plot Seed of "Save the Princess."

I cannot emphasis enough the importance of making the Plot Seed relevant to the player characters. The standard way to get the characters involved is to have someone hire them. Since this one is practically fool proof, it has been overused to the point of comedy. You don't have to write a generic plot. You know your players and their characters. Think of someway to get them involved. Even something as simple as having one of the characters inherit a haunted house that needs exorcising can make the players interested in an otherwise "standard" adventure.

The next step is to determine what type of challenges keeps the heroes from achieving their goal from the onset. Do they have to hurry? investigate? fight? deceive? This is another excellent opportunity to customize the adventure to your group. If one of the characters is a computer expert, throw him a computerized lock or

encrypted treasure map once or twice an adventure to keep him interested and let him show off.

It is important to keep the encounters true to the spirit of the Plot Seed. If the characters are trying to uncover a smuggler operation, they won't want to spend much time with a shady merchant, who turns out to know nothing except how to pass off defective goods. An occasional red herring is fine, but if used too often, the players will learn not to take encounters seriously until near the end of the gaming session. Keeping everything plot related will force your players to pay attention.

Using Plot Seeds to Prepare for a Game

If a plot springs fully formed into your mind, or you are using a professional module, you'll need to reverse engineer the Plot Seed. Reduce the core concept to as few words as possible. Use generic words, to help simplify the idea further. When you get down to one sentence or less, that could be used in any setting, you've found the Plot Seed.

Example: The characters need to go to a neighboring village and bring back a healer to help a sick friend.

The essential elements of this plot are that the characters must travel, retrieve something and return with it. Time is probably of the essence since a healer is involved, so this plot simplifies to the Plot Seed: The Race. The characters must move as quickly as possible. Obstacles and encounters which slow the characters will be the focus of the game. A broken wagon wheel could be just as distressing as a bandit attack.

If speed is a secondary concern but for some reason the healer is difficult to handle, or doesn't want to come, "The Delivery" would be a more appropriate Plot Seed. If the primary difficulty is supposed to be dealing with the peculiarities of the other town, the adventure might become a "Quest."

Once you have determined the seed of your plot, consider each encounter, scene and character, and ask "Does this fit well with the Plot Seed?" If the answer is `no', cut it or gloss over it. This encourages cinematic play. It is safe to assume that an evil wizard must have places to sleep, prepare food, and dispose of bodily waste, but unless there is something interesting about them, there's no reason to develop or dwell on them.

Every GM must find her own level of realism. My rule of thumb is: if it wouldn't get screen time in an action movie, don't waste game time on it. If your players are the type who after killing the evil wizard, strip his lab of everything of value and go through his laundry looking for loose change, you're going to need to develop your games in greater detail.

GMing with Plot Seeds

When behind the GM screen, keep the Plot Seed in mind, and maybe even on a sticky note on the back of the screen. Try not to let the adventure stray too far from the Plot Seed. Unless the goal of the adventure is to interview everyone in a city, once the characters have learned the relevant information from members of the populace, give them a reason to move on. If the heroes do go off on a tangent, either rope them back in, or better yet, have the tangent lead back to the plot. This way your players think that you had a detailed scenario planned, and that they worked their way through it. They get a feeling of accomplishment, and think you must be genius to have 'anticipated' their moves.

Example: The characters are convinced the town watchmaker is suspicious because he is constantly cleaning his glasses (hmm? magic glasses?) Actually you know the watchmaker is developing an eye stigmatism, and so is trying to wipe away the spots he always sees. Rather than let the players follow the watchmaker around until they're convinced he's harmless, have him be attacked by the vampire the party should be looking for.

When adlibbing during a game, a Plot Seed gives you an idea what kind of challenges fit with the theme. If a Plot Seed requires parley and political maneuvering, throwing muggers and monsters at the characters when they stray from the plot is not a good idea. Perhaps the commoner they are wasting time with is actually the mother of one of the domestic servants at the palace and has heard some juicy morsels of gossip. Or if the player characters insist on wandering back allies, have the thug they encounter be part of a criminal organization with political clout. He'll still rob the heroes, but having the stolen jewelry turn up in someone else's possession, could give the party insight into the underground network.

Finally, the Plot Seed reminds you what climax the adventure is building towards. You can adjust the pacing of the game to make sure the characters reach it without

having large amounts of dénouement. When you reach the climax make sure to convey the importance to your players though your descriptions, mannerisms and tone of voice.

Example Plot Seeds

Here is a list of Plot Seeds for use in your campaign. This isn't an exhaustive list of all possible Plot Seeds. You may think of some that aren't covered here.

Body Snatchers: Through magic, brainwashing, or cybernetic implants the villain takes control of a large number of innocent people. The victims act semi-normal, but are working to advance some diabolical plot. What makes these adventures challenging is that the heroes don't know who they can trust. Authority figures who have been compromised can legally make the characters lives very difficult, and it is in the party's best interest not to hurt the people who have been possessed. The climax occurs when the heroes confront the mastermind, or as they try to administer the cure (for example: putting trace amounts of copper into the water supply to kill the neuro-parasites).

The Chase: The heroes are chasing something. Usually whatever it is doesn't want to be caught. The heroes must track their prey, and try to gain ground on it. Typical challenges include places where the trail becomes hard follow, such as at crossroads or interstellar dust clouds. Anything which slows the party down such as border guards and mechanical failures must also be dealt with quickly. The climax occurs when the characters catch up to their quarry.

Chase Variant: Hot Potato : In this variant of the Chase the heroes are after an object such as a crystal statue of a falcon or a briefcase of national secrets. They track down the person with the item only to find that it has already been lost/stolen/sold. This process is repeated several times until the characters finally catch up with their objective. Hot Potato can be an extremely frustrating adventure if mishandled. Ideally the heroes should never feel completely defeated, but should be reduced to "if this last lead doesn't turn up anything we're finished."

Counter Ops: The heroes are spy catchers. They are defending either a project or a person from covert attack. Sabotage, assassination, and terrorism are common plots to be foiled. Counter Ops adventures are reactive, in that the characters never get to make the first move. They must track down leads and try to prevent any plots of which they learn. Paranoia runs high in these situations and the heroes might be manipulated into unknowingly helping their enemies. The most efficient way to deal with the situation may be to lay a trap for the assailant.

Defend the Fort: This is another type of reactive adventure. The characters are given a position to protect. It could be a town, a derelict starship, or an actual castle. Much of the adventure time is spent planning for an attack. A map is usually necessary so the players can identify weak points and try to bolster them. Once the party is dug in, the climax is when the enemy arrives. Usually the enemy comes en mass but a few very powerful opponents such as dragons or giants could also pose a threat to the fortification. The situation may be complicated with non-combatants that the heroes need to protect.

Delivery: The party needs to get an object from point A to point B, but for some reason either the area between the start and finish is inhospitable, or the delivery itself is difficult to handle. The terrain could be badlands, or not very well mapped. The object could be large and/or fragile requiring extra care. A common variant is for the delivery to be alive. Delivering a cattle rustler to trial or a not-quite-willing princess to charm school can make an otherwise simple journey quite a headache. The climax is not when the object is delivered, it is actually when heroes overcome the largest obstacle. (If the characters have fought off wolves and bandits and jury-rigged gliders to fly across a chasm, don't make them deal with a washed out road just before the end. It's anticlimactic.)

Diplomacy: The player characters want something and they have to negotiate for it. Regardless of whether they want to make peace between warring star systems, close a corporate deal, or one of them just wants a date with the girl in the front row, they have to make other people do what they want. Few people will give something for nothing, and there might even be those who want the same thing as player characters, or simply don't want the PCs to get it.

These are role-playing intensive adventures, with little or no need for combat or even most skill checks. Lies, manipulation, bribery, and limited violence can be used, but there will be repercussions if the party doesn't cover their tracks well enough. On the other hand being

completely candid could warn their opponents. The climax is when the cards go down: when some or all of the maneuvering which has occurred is exposed, tempers run high and people tend to make snap decisions based on the new facts. Note, unlike other plot seeds, make sure your players know that they are on a diplomatic mission. Nothing ruins a peace summit faster than having a character open fire with a howitzer assault cannon the first time they're insulted.

The Fugitive: Rightly or wrongly one or more of the heroes is accused of a crime, and must elude capture. If the characters deserve the title 'hero' they've probably been framed, but sometimes government agents need to get out of town when their cover's been blown. Similar to the Body Snatcher, paranoia runs high in Fugitive games and the characters often want to use non-lethal methods against misguided enemies. The climax is when the Fugitives find the evidence to clear themselves, cross the border out of the jurisdiction where they're wanted, or kill their false accuser.

Fugitive Variant: Jail Break: In the beginning of Jail Break the heroes are aspiring to be fugitives. They are in a prison or POW camp of some kind. They have been striped of most or all of their tools and must use ingenuity to escape. It's possible that simply making it outside the wall means freedom, but in most cases the Fugitives then have to put significant distance between themselves and the prison. If you want to run a Jail Break adventure, don't contrive an inescapable trap to send the characters directly to jail without passing GO. Instead prepare the scenario in addition to the normal plotline, and for the next several adventures watch for the players to give you a reasonable pretext such as bungling an escape or being belligerent to the wrong person while the city watch is within shouting distance.

Giant Monster Steps on the City: No list of Plot Seeds would be complete without this B-movie classic. The heroes are confronted with a very large and seemingly invincible creature intent on destroying a city or planet. The classic rubber-suited monster qualifies, as do doomsday asteroids and dragons (if they are played properly, instead of just as a pile of hit points like in some games.) Defeating the giant monster requires feats of incredible logistics to exploit its one weakness. The characters might have to divert an entire country's power supply to a single experimental super weapon, or learn the monster's only weak point and communicate the information to the eagle-eyed archer. Make sure this game has plenty of action and collateral damage. The climax is when everything is in place so the heroes can take their "one and only shot" at the giant monster. What ever you do, don't let bad dice rolls screw up the shot, unless there is some way to risk life and limb to get another try.

Kill the Monster: No joke, the difference between this and the Giant Monster is that the heroes can look the enemy in the eye. The monster may seem nearly invincible but the psychological differences between a monster and a giant monster are huge. First the damage is much more contained: even the most voracious vampire takes a long time to depopulate a single village. Next it is much harder to track a monster (you know instantly when Gojira is in town, but you could brush against a doppelganger and not know it). Finally there is the chance to face the monster in mano-y-mano melee. The steps to this type of adventure are: identify the monster (usually from a victim), learn its weaknesses, track/ trap it, and finally confront the beast. Kill the Monster is much like a Counter Ops adventure but emphasizes the action and danger over investigation and uncertainty.

Ninja Mission: This is the other side of a Counter Ops. adventure. Everyone forgets the first rule of Ninja Missions: If ANYONE ever learns that you're a ninja, you screwed up. The second rule is if anyone figures out that a ninja was involved at all, you probably screwed up. Whether set in feudal Japan or the mean streets of Neo-Tokyo, the point of a Ninja Mission is to accomplish your goal, without being discovered. Sometimes this means sneaking around in black body suits, but some goals can be met by dealing face to face with your targets.

Deceit and manipulation are the orders of the day, and often the characters themselves will be playing roles. There are also possibilities for a 'toy race' where the characters use magic or technology to avoid magical or technological detection. The players get to set the pace of these games with the plan they are trying to carry out. Make sure to include the time the players will need to make their plan in your estimations of game length. The Climax of a Ninja Mission is a tricky thing, because the players can't really relax until the mission is accomplished and their characters are walking (not

sneaking) out the door. A word of warning: subtlety, intelligence, and good role-playing are essential, unless you are willing to kill the dumb, violent barbarian who couldn't lie his way out of paper bag, don't send him on a Ninja Mission.

Since Ninja missions are so tricky to pull of properly, here's an example to get you in the mindset. If the mission is to kill a crime boss: Shooting him and framing someone is O.K. Arranging an 'accident' is better. Arranging 'natural causes' is good. Convincing a wise guy that the boss is sleeping with his wife and letting the wise-guy blow him away in front of witnesses is wonderful.

The Quest: The heroes must travel to an exotic land to retrieve an important item. The best-known examples are the Quest for the Holy Grail and looking for pirate treasure. Unless they have a map with an "X", the party has only a vague idea where the object is located. Quests are best when the item has already been lost for a time, so the characters must piece together clues from pirate's diaries or ancient inscriptions. The search can be long and drawn out, as clues are found in graves and antiquity museums across the globe. Or the adventures may hit pay dirt the first time, and simply have to find the central shrine in the lost city they've discovered. In addition to ancient traps, hostile natives, and natural hazards, the party might face competition for the find. The climax is when the characters almost have the Holy Grail in their grasp, and then there is one more obstacle. Although piecing clues together is important on a Quest, realistic archeology is tedious. Try to balance the mental tasks with physical ones.

Quest Variant: Stranger in a Strange Land For a twist to the standard Quest, the heroes find themselves in an alien land and must search for a way to return home. In addition to the normal perils of the adventure, the characters must deal with culture shock. Cultural difficulties range from as simple as having to crawl through the doors of child-sized houses, to as deadly as breaking laws (especially with regards to bearing arms). A new environment also means new natural hazards. Does this land have carnivorous plants, or are the lakes full of acid?

The Race: Similar to the Chase, except the characters know exactly where they're going and nothing but speed is important. The reason for the adventure might be trying to win an actual race, deliver important intelligence information to central command before the enemy offensive starts, or get the Nobel laureate scientist to his invention so he can stop the implosion of a universe swallowing black hole. Obstacles are anything that slows the characters down, or makes them lose their way. The competition could resort to dirty tricks to cost the party time. The climax could either be when the heroes reach the goal or when they do whatever has to be done quickly in that exact spot.

Save the Princess: This is a simple Plot Seed. The bad guys took something from the heroes, now they're going to take it back. The good guys know where the bad guys are and the bad guys know that they're coming. Saving the Princess is a matter of working through all the guardians, traps, and tricks that have been laid. The 'Princess' doesn't actually have to be alive, she could be a statue or prototype. But I prefer to have her screaming and pleading for the heroes to save her. The climax is usually confronting the Boss, after defeating his henchmen. With the Boss killed, the heroes can retrieve the princess. (The manga *Magical Knights Rayearth* by CLAMP adds a particularly cruel twist to the Save the Princess Plot Seed, but I won't spoil it for you.) This plot seed is also known as the Dungeon Delve or Smash and Grab.

Scavenger Hunt: The Scavenger Hunt is a series of several mini-Quests. The heroes need to collect several items from scattered locations. The items might be components for a magical spell or parts of an engine which were scattered during the crash landing of an alien vessel. In fact the things to be collected might be alive: the heroes need to unite all 6 great-granddaughters of a now dead heroine, so that they can perform a magical ritual to banish the demon their ancestor had defeated. Each object on the quest has a different set of challenges which must be overcome in order to obtain it. Vary the tasks to keep it interesting and make sure each character has at least one chance to show off over the course of the Scavenger Hunt. The climax isn't when the last piece is collected, but when the heroes try to do whatever they needed all the parts.

Serial Killer: The Serial Killer is much like Counter Ops in that it puts the characters in a reactive position. The adventure usually starts with a body. Other serial crimes such as robbery or stealing peoples' emotions are possible. Unlike Kill the Monster, Serial Killer adventures go into detail about the motivation behind the murder

and how to predict/ prevent the next one. Insanity, ritual sacrifice, and super-science experimentation are among the possible reasons.

From a GM point of view, Serial Killer adventures are nearly fool proof. You can make sure that the first body doesn't have enough clues to solve the case and introduce new leads at a controlled pace. On the other end, if the characters are ignoring the clues you've presented, each time they screw up they get another crime scene to find clues. Also the Killer becomes bolder and worries less about covering his tracks until finally he's calling the police to taunt them. Unless your players are completely incompetent, eventually they'll find some way to track their quarry. These games can range from very grim, subdued forensic detectives who spend their time poring over the evidence and playing "what if" all the way to bouncy-anime magical girls who go out for ice cream after destroying chi stealing monsters. The climax is when the heroes confront the killer.

Serial Killer Variant: The Mad Bomber: The Mad Bomber is like the Serial Killer in that he commits violent crimes one after another, but he's not nearby when the fireworks go off. Mad Bomber adventures break the intense investigation and psychology with mindless action as the heroes scramble to stop the destruction. Bombs are only one possibility. Disease, and brainwashing innocent people to go postal are other good tricks (but this is moving towards a Body Snatchers game.) The climax is confronting the mastermind. Usually the perpetrator is not physically menacing but is made dangerous by a 'masterpiece' in progress.

The Swarm: The heroes face a near infinite number of weak opponents. Aliens or undead (or undead aliens?) are good choices. While individuals pose no significant threat, their army-ant style tactics of attacking without thought of personal risk make the Swarm very dangerous overall. Characters with area affect abilities will rack up obscene body counts. Simply killing every last member of the swarm is inefficient, sometimes impossible, and very quickly boring. The characters must instead find shelter, regroup, and determine how to stop the swarm. Perhaps if they smash the necromancer's amulet, his skeletal armies will collapse or maybe they should just use a tactical nuclear strike to clean out the infestation. Swarms often have two climaxes. The first is when the swarm is dealt with; the second is when one very strong member turns out to have survived.

Who Did It: Like the Serial Killer, these adventure starts with a murder or other crime. The heroes are presented with a small pool of suspects, each who has personal secrets which may or may not be relevant to the crime. The killer may strike again, but usually only to cover tracks from the first crime. Red Herrings are accepted and anticipated. Who Did It is very difficult to write and run. All the clues must be presented, but if they are too obvious, there is no mystery. On the other hand, if the players overlook or misinterpret something, they may never solve the crime.

There are some tricks to make Who Did It more workable. The first is to copy the movie *Clue*. Design the scenario so that any of the suspects could be guilty, then when it's time to finish the game session, let the lead the heroes are following pan out. This only works if the outcome of the case has no effect on future events (like a prime time murder mystery show). Another trick is to keep a 'case cracker' clue that you feed to the group right before you want the climax to occur. Finally you can have the killer panic and do something stupid if the heroes just keep pestering him.

War: This is probably the simplest Plot Seed. The Heroes have a known enemy and both sides want to kill each other. The heroes might be leading the charge on white stallions, or they could be a group of Vietnam draftees. Other possibilities include a Mob War, or a police department's War on Crime. The challenges are straightforward: kill your opponent while avoiding as much personal risk as possible. Adventures swing between strategy and brute force. Between offensive and defensive. In modern warfare, it's not as important to kill your enemy as to "take away his ability to fight back." Likewise you may want the enemy alive for interrogation or trial. There must be a clear objective or War breaks down into pointless unrelated battles. The climax is when you achieve your goal or prevent your enemy from reaching theirs.

These are just some of the possible plot seeds to get you started. You can use these to spark new types of adventures in your campaign and keep the plots focused. Or if you like the idea, but not my examples, you can use the concept to generate seeds and grow new plots of your own.

2) Stock Characters

Maintaining a mental library of stock characters is important for improvising when the party strikes off in a direction you were not expecting. The impromptu characters need to have distinct and believable personalities. On the other hand, if you stop to think of memorable traits for every incidental character this will slow down game play and populate your world with so many quirky characters that the players may not be able to take the game seriously. Besides, you want the players to remember the dragons, evil masterminds and killer androids, not the bartender who insists that his false teeth are gold when they're really copper.

Everyone complains about stereotypes, but there is a reason that they keep appearing in books, movies, and games: stereotypes work. This is especially true in role-playing where you don't have access to Hollywood back lots, and you can't include pages of description (that the readers can skim if they get bored).

Example: In a modern setting, the characters decide to stop and eat lunch before reaching the site of the adventure. So the GM improvises: "The waitress is in her late-forties, and wears her hair up. She walks up to the table, chewing her gum with her mouth open and asks, 'Ya know what ya want yet?'"

From this description it is instantly apparent that the party is in a greasy spoon. You didn't have to tell your players anything about the other patrons, the layout of the restaurant, or even what the waitress's cloths were like.

Now that you know why stock characters are not only necessary but useful, here are some examples.



Stock Character Library

Anime Girl: This is the type of character you hate, love, or love to hate. Here this term is used to refer to an attractive, high energy, teenage female.

Anime Girls are curious and indiscrete, especially about matters of the heart. They ask direct questions about emotions that the characters may be uncomfortable answering. They also make shockingly forward statements about their own emotions. This is not because they don't understand love; they simply haven't learned to be ashamed of showing affection.

Anime Girls do not have the same priorities as more mature characters. In their adolescent minds, getting a chance to eat sweets is equally important with saving a village. Style is more important than functionality when choosing equipment. Their motivations are immature, but they end up doing the right thing.

Not particularly bright, Anime Girls stick to concepts they can grasp: who's the good guy, who's the bad guy. The details of the conflict tend to wash over them.

These girls view the world through rose-colored glasses. They see the best in everyone, including their enemies. Anime Girls are quick to trust, and easily wounded if their trust is betrayed. They have a remarkable ability to fight without letting it get personal. They cry for villains they kill.

Anime Girls are klutzes who run into things if they get distracted while walking. But each will have one thing they do particularly well. The party will probably want to make use of this specialty, if they can put up with the Anime Girl for that long. Any items the Anime Girl makes for them will work as advertised, but will be insufferably cute.

Anime Girls are concerned with the well-being of others and may be just the impromptu character to nurse a wounded party back to health. Not surprisingly they are prone to Florence Nightingale complexes.

Anime Girls do everything enthusiastically, so when they fail, they do so spectacularly. Even when they succeed they can make a mess in the process.

Barkeep: The archetypical Barkeep is a large, bald, jovial man. He is tolerant of the player characters' idiosyncrasies, provided they don't cause trouble. In fantasy settings the Barkeep doubles as the bouncer and innkeeper.

The Barkeep has to listen to everyone's problems, so he has a clear picture of the local situation. He doesn't spread this information around, but 'tips' can get him to divulge specific facts in which the party is interested.

In a modern setting, a Barkeep won't know everyone in a city. By properly choosing the bar (uptown club, biker bar, dockside bar) the player characters can significantly improve the odds of the barkeep knowing what they need to learn.

The corresponding Barmaid is a robust middle-aged woman with a large bosom. These Barmaids have a talent for giving crushing bear hugs to the character who wants one the least.

Bureaucrat/Middle Management: If the characters deal with any form of government past, present, future or fantasy, they will encounter bureaucrats. Large organizations, such as adventurer's guilds will also have people to look after the business end of things. Bureaucrats prefer safety and predictability over excitement. Heroes are anything but safe and predictable. Bureaucrats usually start with a neutral attitude towards the party which quickly deteriorates into annoyance.

Bureaucrats believe everything must be handled within the framework of the system. Normal procedure will take a long time, and is very boring role-playing, so the characters will want to motivate the bureaucrats to help them. Individual bureaucrats may be willing to expedite the process in response to bribes, flattery, name-dropping, or intimidation. Once the party has his support, a bureaucrat can do virtually anything within the organization's power (regardless of legality). Some possibilities include: appointments, confidential information, company equipment, permits or false identification.

Corporate Service Personnel: Corporate Service Personnel are instantly recognizable by their uniform, and the company required smile. They are found at fast food restaurants, hotel front desks, bank teller windows, and spaceport check in.

The corporate training program has taught them to act as virtual androids. In futuristic campaigns, they might actually be androids. They greet every customer exactly the same way. Anything outside of the normal operating procedures requires calling over the manager. Fraternizing with customers is discouraged or forbidden. Most become uncomfortable if a customer calls them by name, despite the fact that they all wear nametags. Getting a Corporate Service Personnel to "break out of character" and help the party is difficult because of the myth that they are constantly monitored for irregularities.

Corporate Service Personnel are out of place in fantasy. They should be used only in modern or futuristic settings. Furthermore, they will only be encountered on the job. When not working they are indistinguishable from the normal population.

Daredevil: The Daredevil is good at what he does, and he is the first to tell you how good he is. Acrobats, pilots, and hackers are commonly Daredevils. They are always looking for a stunt more dangerous than their last one. Doing something difficult, and doing it with style is more important than the payoff.

Daredevils are loners: their egos can't stand to work with anyone who is as good as they are (although the Daredevil will insist he's really the best). Other people can't stand the Daredevil's obsession with his work and himself.

The party will usually come in contact with the Daredevil because they need his skills. He'll be glad to help, provided the task is changing enough. The party will have a difficult time convincing him to play it safe and not draw attention to himself. Because of his recklessness, the Daredevil will bite off more than he can chew if the party doesn't keep coming up with things to keep him busy. Likewise, after a secret job the Daredevil will brag about it.

Another type of Daredevil are the auto mechanics, techno-tinkers, and talismongers who always have to push the envelop with their next project. One of these Daredevils will gladly use the tricked out equipment himself, but usually the party will want the equipment for themselves. There is always a trick to getting the equipment to work, and it is prone to breakdowns, but when it works there is nothing better.

Despite these drawbacks, parties will often choose a Daredevil over a Professional, because the Daredevil works cheap and will take any risk.

Domestic Servant: Domestic Servants are the characters behind the scene who make the castles, palaces, and manor homes the idyllic settings the player characters enjoy visiting. A single butler or maid can take care of a townhouse or London flat. Dozens or hundreds are needed to maintain imperial courts.

A proper Domestic Servant is nowhere to be seen until needed, then appears instantly without being called. This is idealization, but works well for an impromptu archetype. Of course rather than materializing when needed, they are actually hovering quietly nearby, blending into the decor seamlessly; or going about their normal duties and listening for their cue.

A smart player will realize that because domestics blend into court life so well, they are privy to most dealings. This player's character will pump the domestic staff for information. Domestic Servants are reluctant to divulge information because they know it could get them fired and cost them the recommendation they need to get another job. They will accept "tips" for relatively harmless tidbits, but clam up if the player character asks for sensitive information.

Rather than money, the character can attempt to lure the Domestic Servant into friendly gossip. Information gathered this way will consist mostly of first and second hand accounts of inexplicable but seemingly isolated happenings around the manor or palace.

On the off chance that a Domestic Servant has learned of her employer's foul deeds, she will tearfully tell all to the first character who offers her protection.

Domestic Servants in the employment of openly evil characters are completely unflappable ("Very good, sire. Shall I put this body with the others?") They are also very loyal, because their employment isn't the only thing that will be terminated if they are suspected of gossiping.

Dwarf: Players who love Dwarf characters (and those who hate them) will tell you there is more to Dwarves than just a beard. Dwarves are gruff and plain spoken to the point of vulgarity. They are practical to the point of materialism. Because Dwarves are practical, they don't care what the player characters do, so long as it doesn't interfere with their work.

Dwarves use minor insults and verbal barbs in conversation. They do not consider this rude and enjoy trading verbal blows. Non-dwarf characters should be careful when retorting to a dwarf: Some subjects are strictly off limits.

Dwarves prefer physical professions such as miner, metal smith, or lumberjack. They work hard, and when the job is done, they party hard. Dwarven sports are as physically demanding as their labor.

To a Dwarf the finer things in life mean: properly balanced tools and strong alcoholic drinks. They have no use for "art for art's sake" but can appreciate ornate armor and architecture.

Dwarves are clannish, and will always side with their own kind in a fight.

Female Dwarves are depicted in games and stories much less frequently than male dwarves. Most Dwarven girls aspire to become barmaids. In addition to the tips, it offers them a better chance to meet an eligible bachelor than they would have in the kitchen or keeping a mining company's books. Dwarven barmaids move with the same sense of purpose as their men. They are usually more cheerful than the men, but they have tempers that can make veteran warriors tremble.

Fantasy Dwarves are an exaggerated depiction of certain human traits. It should come as no surprise that Dwarven culture is alive and well in the assembly line factories and greasy-spoon diners of the modern world.

Elf: This entry considers "civilized" Elves. Although they live in harmony with nature they have achieved a high level of technological/cultural/mystical society. For feral Elves, use the Savage entry.

Elves have every right to be proud of their civilization, which is older and more advanced than their neighbors. Neighbors who don't share this opinion find elves pompous and haughty. No matter how many times an elf is outdone by one of the "lesser races," he is still secure in the knowledge that he is inherently better.

Elves are masters of the backhanded insult. Example insults are: "You have an aura of the wilderness about you" (Translation: "You haven't bathed in a long time."); "It appears that life has been good to you" (Translation: "You're fat."); "You have great potential." (Translation: "You have a long ways to go.") To other elves the subtle sarcastic tone is unmistakable, but characters unfamiliar with the subtleties of the elven tongue will not realize when they are being made fun of. This is a great source of amusement for the Elves.

Elves have had decades of practice delivering these cloaked insults. No one can reasonably expect the game master to coin them off the top of his head. If you play Elves as unfailingly polite but speak in a condescending tone, the players will keep reading between the lines until they find something to take offense at. (Of course they'll think that's what you intended.)

The best way for the party to enlist an Elf's help is to appeal to his sense of the greater good. Elves pride themselves on being righteous. An Elf may not care to dirty his hands with the problems of a human or even a whole village. He will help if the party can phase their request as a matter of principle ("The bandits are led by the strongest thug, how can you condone 'Might makes Right'?") If the party tricks the Elf into helping them and betrays the principles they espoused, the Elf will pursue them with religious wrath.

When an Elf is on the opposite side of the battle lines from the party, he will want to see them not only defeated, but humiliated. If given an opening to kill one or more of the player characters, the Elf may spare them so that he can gloat over them. Elves are notorious for underestimating the opposition.

On the other side, the party will have to be careful not to underestimate Elves. Because all Elves are confident, the party will have a difficult time recognizing when they meet one who truly outclasses them.

Elves pay maddening little attention to humans. They actively dislike most other races such as Dwarves or Ogres. The only creatures elves treat as equals are their Fey kindred and dragons.

Art is essential to Elven life. Every item, from their swords to their boots will be decorated. Manuscripts are written in calligraphy and illuminated. Paintings and carvings cover every surface of elven buildings.

The Elven mentality can be applied equally well to the gentry in more realistic settings.

Employer: One of the most common (and overused) ways to get a party involved in an adventure is for someone to hire them to resolve a situation. This means that Employers are one of the most frequently encountered types of characters.

The Employer doesn't expect the party to take his first offer. He'll leave himself enough budget to negotiate. (Typically he offers about 75% of what he thinks it will actually cost him.) He never pays more than half up front.

Employers like to offer for benefits that do not cost him, or he can acquire at a discount. Examples are technological equipment produced by his corporation, passage on company starships, permits, endorsements, and spell casting. If he has access to equipment the party wants, he'll offer it upfront instead of currency.

Employers always negotiate from a position of strength. He needs to convince the party that they need his offer more than he needs their help. This may or may not be true, but he knows that if the party senses any desperation, they'll come after him for everything they can. Typically, an Employer can only be gouged for double his initial offer (150% of what he expected to pay) before he walks away from the table.

The only time an Employer is accommodating and helpful is when he plans to double cross the party. If the Employer is paying the party handsomely, and offers assistance, it is to distract them from what he's not telling them. For example, he "forgot" to mention that he wasn't the original owner of the stolen treasure chest he asked them to recover; or that it is cursed; or that half the ogre army is looking for it. If you want players to be paranoid on an adventure, make the Employer helpful.

A good employer will never be surprised. He will show little emotion when the job is completed regardless of the party's success or failure. If they bring back something he really wants, his body language will give him away: his eyes will light up like a child at Christmas. But he will still tell the party that they only did, 'okay.'

Knight: A Knight is loved by his friends and feared by his enemies. The Knight is highly skilled in some form of combat. While he lives for his reputation as a warrior, he also has standing and social skills to earn respect where force of arms will not.

In any setting where there are armies, there will be knights. They are typically heavy cavalry (including tanks and armored combat suits) or fighter pilots. It is appropriate that the Red Baron is known as the Last of the Teutonic Knights.

Knights make better enemies than allies. If the party works with a Knight, he will tend to upstage them through sheer ability and force of personality. When working on the same side, Knights make excellent rivals for the party: always just as good or a little better than they are.

When facing the party, the Knight will not resort to any underhanded tactics, and will have remarkable patience for the party using them against him. This being said, a Knight is not stupid. He will use every honorable advantage he has. This includes ambushes, fire attacks, superior numbers and equipment, and possibly magic depending on the setting.

If a Knight senses defeat, he will cede the battlefield to the player characters and retreat to face them another day. If placed in a situation where he cannot escape, the Knight will battle fiercely to the end, never asking for mercy. If the party offers him a chance to surrender (and has acted honorably enough that the Knight can trust them) he will take the chance, especially if this means saving the lives of his allies in addition to his own.

If a Knight captures the party during a fight, he will have their wounds tended and invite them to sit at his dinner table as guests while they are prisoners. Again, he is not stupid, he will have guards or magical wards ready in case someone tries to attack him or escape. In fact, he probably won't look up from his meal as the offender is thrown to the floor and dragged back to the dungeon.

A Knight always treats a lady properly. Notice use of the word 'lady,' not 'woman.' A female who attempts to take advantage of his kindness will not be given a second chance.

A Knight is far from egalitarian. He expects respect and obedience from his social inferiors, and he extends his protection to them in exchange. The fastest way to pick a fight with a Knight is to assault one of his underlings. A Knight is loyal and obsequious to his superiors. Loyalty is more important than his life, but not more important than his honor. If a Knight finds himself under a dishonorable superior, he will make 'mistakes' to save his honor, or resign. A samurai (Japanese equivalent of the Knight) will commit suicide if unable to countermand dishonorable orders.

Knights are by nature memorable. You shouldn't use this stock character on the spur of the moment very often. But it comes in useful when the party decides to run afoul of a wandering adventurer or the local militia rather than follow the plot.

(Note: This is an idealized archetype. Most actual Knights and their counterparts around the world were violent bullies, more accurately described by the Thug entry below.)

Law Enforcement: Any place with laws will have someone to enforce them: police, town guards, sheriffs, or corporate security. The Law Enforcement may include Daredevils, Professionals, and Thugs among their numbers. But the majority of the officers can be expected to act as Law Enforcement officers.

Most player characters have two strikes against them in the eyes of Law Enforcers: They're not locals and they are suspicious. The street Law Enforcers are polite but curt. They respond well to requests for help. If not given proper respect, Law Enforcers can quickly make life difficult for the characters, though.

The law doesn't get involved in a developing situation until it is spiraling out of control, or already out of control. The Law Enforcers know they're coming in without all the facts. Their first goal is stop everything, and sort the situation out; preferably back at headquarters. Unless the player characters can afford to spend hours making statements and are on good terms with the police, they'll probably want to skip out when the police show up.

Law Enforcers don't ask for anything: they expect to be obeyed. They may use the words: "Will you please..." but it is still an order. Noncompliant characters will get one, maybe two warnings. Law Enforcers are more than willing to attack if threatened, and will always call for back up if the situation is dangerous.

Mad Scientist: The Mad Scientist walks the thin line between genius and madness. He can turn up in any intellectual profession: wizard, clergyman, medical researcher, and technical designer. Mad Scientists are not all equally crazy. They range from the wild-eye maniacs who don't have the sense to get out of the way of their own creations to slightly eccentric geniuses. One of the most disturbing examples is Dr. Moreau: a composed and congenial sociopath.

Use the Mad Scientist as an impromptu character when the party unexpectedly decides to investigate the origins of an unusual monster or other plot device (such as a virus, doomsday bomb, or invisibility technology). The creation is the real focus of the adventure.

Mad Scientists have a habit of getting themselves killed by their own creation. If this happened, the characters will know a Mad Scientist only through his notes and diary. These are organized in a way that makes perfect sense tot he scientist but is completely inscrutable to everyone else.

If he is still alive, the Mad Scientist will be torn between conflicting emotions regarding his brainchild. He realizes the need to destroy it, or at least bring it back under his control. At the same time he finds a twisted pride in its capabilities and wants to see just how much damage it can do.

You can use the Mad Scientist to tell the player characters the creature's weakness (after they've completely ignored the clues). He will help them almost complete the adventure, then turn on the party at the last minute. His twisted paternal love for his creation gets the better of him and he tries to save it, or he was only using the party to regain control for himself.

Physically, Mad Scientists are unimposing, but they can still be dangerous if they have access to devices they've created.

The hallmark of the character is that they can be making no sense one minute, then startling adroit comments the next. Their nonsensical ramblings center around a hobby unrelated to their normal work. Possible examples include art, classical music or opera, cooking, fine cigars, or folding origami.

If the party starts asking the Mad Scientist too many questions, you will either need to flesh the Mad Scientist out into a full-fledged character or kill him.

The absent-minded professor, fulfills the same role as Mad Scientist, and acts much the same way. The important difference is he didn't create the threat. He is simply so brilliant that he understands what needs to be done to stop it. Also, he honestly wants to help the party save the day.

Peasant: Agrarian workers are similar across cultures and through history. The peasant is bests summed up by a line from the *Magnificent Seven* (MGM video & DVD):

"You must excuse them. They are farmers here. They are afraid of everyone and everything. They are afraid of rain, and no rain. The summer may be too hot, the winter - too cold. The sow has no pigs, the farmer is afraid he may starve. She has too many, he's afraid she may starve."

The player characters will be especially frightening. They are strangers; they are armed; they're rich compared to the peasants but still chose to stop in the village rather than ride past. A 'normal' group of adventures would be scary enough, but most adventuring parties include at least one mystic, Herculean, alien (non-human), or down right disreputable member.

A character's reputation for bravery and social standing mean nothing to the Peasants. The only thing that can improve their attitudes is a reputation for charity, such as Robin Hood had.

Peasants will usually come into a story because someone or something threatens their village. The player characters will heroically step in and offer to save the village. But unless the threat is truly extraordinary, the peasants will prefer to live with the danger rather than let the player characters deal with it. Even a vampire will be tolerated if the local birth rate can sustain his appetite.

For the Peasants, it is a case of taking the devil you know over the devil you don't. If the party fails, the villain will retaliate against the village. If the party succeeds, there is no guarantee that they won't set them selves up as petty lords, or extract some other price.

Assumably the party will confront the threat, with or without the Peasants' blessings. Failure results in the Peasants hating the characters and driving them out of town, lynching them, or betraying them to the villain. If the party succeeds, they will be given the agreed upon reward, nothing more. If there was no promised reward, the party will receive at most a humble banquet in their honor if the threat was truly monstrous.

When things have been resolved, the Peasants will make it clear that its time for the party to move on.

"For them, each season has its tasks. If there were a season for gratitude, they'd show it more." (from the *Magnificent Seven* again.)



Professional: The professional is highly skilled, possibly more skilled than the player characters. He says little, preferring to let his actions speak for him. Armorers, master craftsmen, wilderness guides, ninja and bodyguards are common Professionals. Armies, crime families, and police departments include a small team of professionals to deal with out of control situations. These are the Army Rangers, Navy Seals, SWAT teams and hit men.

Once a professional names his price, he does not negotiate. He doesn't care if the party hires him or not. Once an agreement has been reached, he will maintain his end of the bargain through any unforeseen adversity. If it becomes apparent the party won't keep their end of the deal, the Professional will walk away. He might even turn them over to someone who will pay what the party stiffed him.

A Professional's reputation is his life. If the party is opposing a Professional, he will fight them to the end. Even if it means his death. They are immune to bribery. (The exception is bouncers. A bouncer sees a "tip" as part of his pay.)

Savage: A Savage is from a culture less technologically advanced than that of the player characters. A Savage does not consider himself primitive; for him civilization is different from his way of life, but not necessarily better. In areas where there has been open conflict between civilized people and the local tribes, a Savage considers his people superior.

Savages understand the natural order and work within its boundaries. This is not an idyllic existence. Savages are probably the coldest-hearted people the characters will meet. This is a necessity of survival. If a companion is severally wounded or ill, the Savage will leave him behind or euthanize him. The Savage has no qualms about eating whatever source of food is available, including sentients.

Because of this cold attitude towards life and death, Savages will seem stoic at first. This is not the case. After a successful hunt or battle, the Savage will dance from joy and pride.

The party will only encounter Savages on their native turf (a Savage in the city obviously has a story to tell, so should not be relegated to a stock character.) The Savage's initial attitude is neutral. If there is an ongoing conflict with the player character's society (or he is a cannibal), the initial attitude will be distrustful or worse.

Savages make terrible enemies. Even one significantly less powerful than the party is a formidable foe. The Savage knows the territory better than the player characters. He can ambush from perfect concealment and disappear back in the wilderness like a ghost. For a Savage, every fight is for survival. He is willing to use sadistic traps, poisons, "evil" magic and dangerous animals to wear the party down.

If they are not enemies, the party will most likely want to hire a Savage as a local guide. In his home environment, the Savage is unparallel in tracking, navigation, and survival.

It is easy to startle a Savage with something unexpected, but it is difficult to make a lasting impression on him. If something doesn't actively hurt him, he quickly looses his fear of it. No matter what he sees, he can always find some explanation for it within his belief structure.

Savages are deeply superstitious. They have a chant, dance, or talisman for every possible threat. Depending on the setting, some of these might actually ward off the threat. If something is reminiscent of the local tales of devils or gods, the savage will show the proper respect. They also have taboos against traveling to "cursed" sites, or avoiding certain objects or activities.

Savages tend to be sexist. Normally it is the women who are discriminated against, but games are rife with Amazon cultures.

Sidekick: The party will meet other wandering heroes (and villains) during their travels. Few people travel alone. This is a simple matter of needing someone to keep watch while the hero sleeps, help tend the hero's wounds, or a simple need for fellowship. Sidekicks are the copilots, squires, first mates, apprentice mages, and acolytes.

You'll most likely need an impromptu sidekick when the players think of something the adventure author did not: "Who flies the ship when the Air Captain sleeps? Who fed the Duke's horse while he was in the dungeon with us?"

The Sidekick is the same as the heroic character he supports, except that he's different. The main character would not employ the Sidekick if he didn't see part of himself in the Sidekick. A Sidekick will have all the skills needed to follow in his master's footsteps, but

these skills are not as developed. This doesn't mean the Sidekick has all of the same skills: only those needed to complete the job. The Sidekick is not knowledgeable about the master's hobbies, or the skills he acquired before starting his current career.

The Sidekick has his own life, and has been exposed to things the master character has not. This is part of the value of a Sidekick: the ability to do things the hero cannot. Also, Sidekicks are assigned the menial tasks, so are usually more aware than their masters of the daily running of the operation.

Shady Dealer: The motto of a Shady Dealer is: "Everything has a price. Especially people." Shady Dealers range from the two-bit punk peddling drugs and Saturday night specials to the crime boss and corrupt politician. The only real difference is their intellect and sphere of influence.

The player characters will come in contact with a Shady Dealer because they need to buy or sell questionable merchandise. He'll be more than willing to help, and take his cut of the action. He also trades valuable information as a commodity.

A low level Shady Dealer has little tolerance for risk. More powerful ones are willing to gamble, if the payoff is good enough. If the party is asking the Shady Dealer to do something too dangerous, he'll put them in contact with someone who is willing to take those risks.

Low-level Shady Dealers can be cowed and intimidated by threats of violence or calling the police. Powerful Shady Dealers will call the police themselves if the party threatens to use violence (of course he already has enough men on hand to deal with the situation, the police just add legitimacy).

Swashbuckler: Like the Daredevil, a Swashbuckler throws caution to the wind to prove that he is the best. But the Swashbuckler is convinced that he is the best at everything. Swashbucklers have always been associated with tall masted ships. As pirates adapted to new technology such as airplanes and spaceships, they kept their flamboyant ways.

Unlike the Knight or the Daredevil, the Swashbuckler isn't as good as he thinks he is. This is not due to lack of skill, but because he thinks he's perfect. He is proficient with the tools of his trade and social etiquette, as well as some skills for pure bravado. Most of the time the Swashbuckler will be good enough to get the job done. After completing a difficult task, he will go on at length about how easy it was. His gratitude when saved goes something like, "I had him just where I wanted him until you interfered."

A Swashbuckler is very sensitive to slights, real or imagined. He works tirelessly to "even the score" with anyone who upstages or insults him. Depending on the Swashbuckler this could mean waiting for an opportunity to save the character's life or waiting for a chance to kill him.

A Swashbuckler's need to be the center of attention will bring him into conflict with the party. He makes a better rival than a friend. His boisterous nature tends to get him in trouble, exactly when people are depending on him. (He will insist that it was all part of the plan from the beginning and nothing he couldn't handle.) He also makes a wonderfully memorable enemy.

A popular subset of the Swashbuckler is the Gentleman Thief. This type of character will gladly lie, cheat, steal and commit other crimes, but would never think of doing anything "improper."

A Swashbuckler shows deference to females and is extremely forgiving of any transgressions on their part. In fact he prefers "spirited" women.

Since a Swashbuckler tries his best to be memorable, it is hard to make him a background character. This stock character should be used sparingly for minor characters, but when you need a pirate, you need a pirate.

Thug: The hallmark of the Thug is that he talks tough, but lacks the ability to back up his talk. A thug has no useful skills or quality equipment. They travel in packs to increase their strength. Even a Thug encountered alone will throw his weight around, knowing that his gang will back him up.

Street Thugs each wear the gang colors slightly differently. More organized wise guys and security goons wear standardized suits and ties.

Bandits and raiding parties are almost exclusively Thugs. They also creep into the ranks of the town watch, private security firms, and armies. Some armies actively recruit Thugs, eventually degenerating into disorganized war bands. Organized crime uses Thugs as street level enforcers, but is quick to cut them loose if they start attracting trouble.

Thugs are effective against common people, but they are no match for a player character with even basic martial abilities.

A Thug is dumb, but smart enough to realize when he's in over his head. Thugs back down if someone stands up to them. If a Thug knows he is outnumbered or outclassed he drops all pretense of dignity and runs. If prevented from escaping he becomes very apologetic and helpful.



3) Rakugo Props

Using dedicated props in games requires forethought above and beyond that of running the game. First you need to realize there will be an opportunity to use a prop. Then you'll need to find or build it. Then you have to transport the object to the game. Finally, you need to think of some way of keeping it hidden from the players, so as not give away too much of the plot. And of course, all this is for naught if the party decides not to follow the script.

The Japanese have a style of narrative known as Rakugo (落語)literally "relaxed speech"). These comedians tell very animated stories in a sitting position using only three props: a handkerchief, a folding fan, and the kimono on their backs.

These may seem exotic props to a modern Games Master. The point is that those are things the traveling entertainer would have with him anyways. For the modern Game Master three Rakugo props should always be close at hand: A windbreaker jacket, baseball cap, and ballpoint pen (or writing implement of your choice). If you are running a game set in Feudal Japan, it might be worthwhile to research actual Rakugo.

Windbreaker

It is a good idea to have a windbreaker jacket with you every time you game: No matter how hot the weather, the gaming area could still have the air conditioning set to "arctic." If the game table is uncomfortably warm, a windbreaker is light enough that it can be worn as a prop for several minutes before becoming uncomfortable.

A jacket with snaps down the front is the easiest to use. A button-down over shirt also works. The reason you need buttons or snaps is so you can choose which ones to fasten, where as a zipper always starts from one side.

A jacket can be used to depict the following props by following the instructions listed in the entry.

Sample Props

Apron: To depict chefs and homemakers, tie the arms around you waist, with the body of the jacket in front of you. Wiping your hands in the jacket helps establish it as an apron. Blacksmiths wear leather aprons for protection.

Blanket: If you are depicting a character in bed, hold the jacket in front of you. You can hang it off your shoulders if the character is relaxed or unconscious.

If the character is nervous, grip the top of the jacket with both hands like it is it hem of the blanket. If the blanket is wrapped around a disaster victim, put the jacket over your shoulders.

Cape: Button the top button around your neck, and hang the jacket behind your back. Remember, capes are popular with fantasy courtiers in addition to superheroes.

Cloak: Put the jacket over your shoulders and button the top button to represent the clasp.

Flag: Hold the jacket by the collar to wave it.

Half Cape: Put the jacket over your shoulders and button the top button. Then rotate the jacket so that one arm is covered and the other is free. Typically the character's dominant hand is free and the other covered.

Hood: If you aren't using a baseball cap, you can use your jacket to represent a hood by draping it over your head. Leave yourself enough space that you can still see the table; otherwise the character you are depicting will look like he doesn't know where he is going.

Kimono: Put the jacket on and button it half way up. Relaxed samurai are often depicted with their arms folded inside the Kimono and the arms hanging loose. If trouble breaks out, they can put their arms down the baggy sleeves without much effort. You will have significantly more difficulty getting your arms down the sleeves of a jacket without taking it off.

Military Uniform: Button all of the buttons (especially the top one), and flip up the collar (don't flip up the collar on a shirt unless you are trying for the Elizabethan look where the collar goes to the jaw bone.)

Strait Jacket: Put the jacket on backwards, so that the back is against your chest. Cross your arms in front and put your hands in the pockets.

Suit Coat: Button two buttons near the navel.

Sweat Towel: Put the jacket behind you and drape the arms around your neck.

Using the Windbreaker as a Coat

A jacket can also stand in for any kind of trench coat, raincoat, or lab coat. How you treat the jacket can give visual clues to the type of character. When a businessman takes off his jacket, he holds it by 2 fingers and drapes it over his shoulder. Women are more likely to fold the jacket in half over one of their arms and hold it in front of them. Californians are famous for draping sweater arms over their shoulders, or tying them around their waists. A casual character will drop the jacket in a wad. A neat character will lay a jacket down carefully. A meticulous character will keep adjusting the jacket.

When you are actually wearing the jacket, be conscious of whether you have your hands in your pockets or not. Relaxed or cold characters are more likely to put their hands in their pockets.

Reach into the jacket when the character goes for something in an inside pocket, or an under-armed concealed-carry holster. A jacket can also hide a mid-back concealed holster. A little bit of unconvincing stage magic can go a long ways, if you have a prop for what the character is attempting to draw. Hold the object in the palm of your hand, and block or partially block view of the object with your hand, wrist and forearm. This indicates you don't want the object to be seen, even if it is impossible to miss. When pulling it out, hold the object with your fingers and spread the fingers to give the players the best view of the object you can. This shows the players you want the object to be seen.

Baseball Cap

Really you can use any kind of hat, baseball caps are just the most ubiquitous. Most gamers don't wear hats, but many of the characters depicted do. Because baseball caps are small and flexible, you can throw one into your gaming bag if you don't want to be seen wearing it in public.

Most of the time, a hat will be used to depict head covering. The hat's use comes from showing how the character uses his hat.

When a character introduces himself: a humble character will respectfully take his hat off and hold it in front of him; a gentleman will grab the brim of his hat and give it a polite tip (you grab the cap by its bill); a swashbuckler flourishes his hat as he bows. A cowboy grabs his hat by the top to lift and tilts it, especially when greeting a woman.

Plate mail, motorcycle, spacesuit, and Virtual Realty helmets all have visors. Use the hat to indicate if the visor is up or down. Use a pushed back position to indicate a raised visor, so the players can make eye contact with you. When the visor is down, pull the bill down so that you can't see the players, but you can still see the table. The same positions can be used to depict a hood. When the hood is pushed all the way back, remove the hat entirely.

You can represent lopsided hats, like the Australian bush hat by turning the hat sideways. Put the cap on backwards for head covering without a brim, like ski caps or a London Bobby's helmet.

When not using it as a hat, the baseball cap can be used to represent round handled objects. For example: a bowl or hand mirror.

Pen

If you're the Game Master and aren't carrying at least one writing implement, you need to go find one before the game starts. It doesn't matter how tech savvy you are: you can load your laptop (or cell phone) with a database, random number generator, calculator, note pad, cartography/paint program, and internet access. You will still need to write a note, mark someone's character sheet, or find something to throw at the wise cracking player.

Using the pen to represent a pen, quill or computer stylus will keep this prop in constant use regardless of setting. There are always records to be kept and notes to be made. It is equally important what a character does with a pen when not writing. Does he chew the end, tuck it behind his ear, twirl it, tap it on the table (perhaps doing the mumbly-peg around his other hand)?

The pen also stands in for a small, straight tool or weapon: screwdriver, chisel, throwing knife, piton, sensor probe, miniature flashlight, or thermometer. It can represent only part of a larger object, allowing the players imagination to fill in the rest. A pen can be the handle of virtually any tool or melee weapon. Firearms and other "L" shaped weapons shouldn't be represented by a straight pen.

By holding the pen between the pointer and index finger and 'drawing' it across your body, it becomes the feathered end of an arrow. To show someone hit by the arrow, hold the pen in you fist, grunt as you smack it against your body and hold it with the pen sticking out of your hand.

This product does not intend to endorse or glorify smoking, but you can use a pen in place of a cigarette, to give each smoker a distinct character. Does the character keep the cigarette in his mouth or in his hand? Americans hold cigarettes between their pointer and middle fingers; a European will hold it between the middle and ring fingers. If he keeps it in his mouth, does he clamp it between the teeth, or let it hang loosely from the lips?

4) Conclusion

This product gives a selection of tools and techniques for the Game Master a fighting chance when the game takes an unexpected turn. Being a good GM means developing the style which works for you. Use the tools which fit with your style and your group. Even if you don't use a single piece of advice from this product, hopefully it has made you aware of the need to have a plan for when the players surprise you.

If your players ever stop surprising you, it means they have you figured out, not the other way around. You'll need to do something to break the routine, before the players get bored and stop showing up.

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