Creating Your Stories

A story doesn't mean the player characters have to necessarily go anywhere, but this is usually the case. The GM decides the basic plot, creating NPCs that put catalysts in motion. This affects the PCs in some way, causing conflict. Conflicts are how we are challenged and grow. The PCs will decide their own actions every step of the way. If you do not plan on "running a game" (being the GM), then *please skip this chapter!*

THE ART OF WRITING

A good GM has a lot in common with a good writer. However, there are some important differences. A writer is in complete control of the actions of all the characters in the story. A GM only controls the NPCs. A writer may choose from multiple points of view to tell the story. The GM is omniscient, but does not use that as a point of view from which to tell the story. A role-playing game generally has the GM using a writer's rarest point of view, second-person. In fact, we would call this "multiple second-person" as you speak to each player. Like a good book, you are supposed to fall in love with the main characters, in this case, the PCs. The GM's job is to help the player get to know their character intimately through the use of conflict. The PC will grow, change, and develop, just as the characters of any good story.

11.1.1 Protagonists & Antagonists

One of the most difficult parts of the GM's job is the development of a plot that involves multiple protagonists. Unlike a traditional story, there is no main protagonist. Instead, each of the players shares equal glory, usually 3-6 players total. In order to make each player's character "shine", each must have a role in the story that is unique to that character. Each character has a unique set of skills which they bring to the table, and the skills of that character must be instrumental in achieving the end goal.

One way to write a story for multiple protagonists is to see each character as the main protagonist of a separate story. Each character's story is personally relevant to that character and may have goals which are different from the goals of the other characters! For some reason these characters end up working together, usually against a common antagonist. This may only be a sub-plot in light of each character's personal goal, or each character may have a personal reason to battle the antagonist as part of the main plot. The point is that you treat each character as the star of their own *personal* story. They just happen to have a story which requires that they have a supporting role in another character's personal story.

Classic fantasy role-playing used four archetypal characters defined by their roles. These could also be assigned an "elemental" correlation. There is the Fighter, heavily armed and armored melee combatant. This corresponds to the strength and solidity of Earth. The Magic-User fought with intelligence and craft, aspects of the Air element. The Thief was fast, cunning, and dangerous, like Fire. The Cleric was fluid, versatile, and compassionate; traits of the Water element. This balance of four adventurers, with unique skills and abilities has become the standard elements of the adventuring party. Similar balances are usually maintained in any genre.

A GM can't force a player to play a particular type of character. The GM can and should encourage the players to balance out the party by choosing occupations for their characters which complement each other. No one can be a hero all by themselves, so the focus should be on group tactics, not on creating the most powerful individual you can.

Sometimes, no one wants to play a certain type of character, who's sole purpose is to clean up after all the action is over, usually the Healer/Cleric. Never force a player to play a character they don't want to play. There are a couple of work-arounds, generally involving the scarcity of items that duplicate the missing features and abilities. Some GMs may want to "run an NPC", but I don't recommend that the GM ever run a character that will adventure with the group for any extended length of time. If the NPC is run to it's

fullest, it takes away the "thunder" from the other players. If the NPC is kept in the background, they become a "non-person" and are eventually treated as the piece of equipment they should have been. Always use NPCs for story-telling purposes, not for completing the adventuring group!

The problem of missing skills is less of a problem in Virtually Real anyway. You can have a Sniper/Medic or a Soldier that was taught magical healing by their mother, or in Cyberpunk genres, keep a batch of healing patches for the real world and keep most of your combat in cyberspace. You don't need "one level of cleric" to use a healing wand and this does not detract from the uniqueness of the individual characters.

Finally, the GM should work with each player while creating their characters. This can give the players a huge sense of inclusion as you fill in the player's choices with information from the campaign world. Simple questions such as "who taught you that?" can get the player immediately in-tune with the character and the character's story. Next, ask "where are they now?" It may be a good idea for you to build that character if they are alive! Players will begin to think about who these people are and how they have affected their character on a more personal level than just some skill points.

Some additional questions you could ask might be "what does this character look like?" And not just the stats for a singles ad! How do they dress and why? You can ask about best friends, first loves, family, where they live, and what things are in their home. You will basically have the player do a background check on their character. Have them write it out as a short narrative. You put in a lot of work into this game, so they can too!

If a player can't immediately give the name of their character's mother, then they aren't playing the character. They have just created a puppet with fun strings to pull. Or a video game character with buttons to mash. Part of role-playing is playing unique people with personalities different from your own. And what made their personality that way? Was it family? How does the character relate to their parents and siblings? Is there sibling rivalry?

You might make a secret questionnaire and grant 1 Bonus XP point per question that is fully answered, $1/2$ point for partial answers, and 0 XP for "I don't know". Be sure to *reject all cliches!* Every character doesn't hate Orcs/Aliens/Indians/etc because they watched them brutally murder their parents at age 10. This comes up all the time! Any variation on this should just be rejected. It's a cheap way of saying, "They're all dead, okay! Can I go now?" This leaves the GM with no personalities to role-play with. Likewise, the GM shouldn't get cheap either! Constantly attacking the character's friends and family and holding them for ransom is one of the main reasons players often want to start with everyone dead.

Antagonists

Your antagonists should be as detailed as the player's characters. See SUPPORT CHARACTERS (next) for more help, but remember to make things work logically. A quick example: Orcs are attacking in military rank and file. Orcs aren't likely to know *Military Strategy* or have the *Leadership* skills for anything bigger than a rowdy mob. Who is leading them and what do they want? Remember that your antagonist's inner conflicts supply the fuel for the outer conflicts of your story. *Find conflict!*

An antagonist doesn't have to be an evil villain. It can be a person with opposing goals, or even mother nature, a mountain, or just circumstances!

Consider a war between elves and humans. From the humans' perspective, the elves have been constantly trying to tell them how to work their own land. They try to pretend like they are little overlords looking down on others, pretending like they want to do good, but they really just want power. From the elves' perspective, a bunch of humans have stripped the land they were on and are now moving towards the elven forest. They destroy sacred trees, slash-and-burn farming, they pollute the water and the land. They think they own the land, but the land owns us! And they refuse to listen and learn! They are barely less savage than Orcs!

Who's the evil party there? Usually the difference between a hero and the "BBEG" is a matter of who wins the last battle. The difference between a revolutionary and a terrorist is which side wins the war. Fantasy games are usually very much about vanquishing the "evil" threat, but often the worst evils we can imagine are the blasphemies and truths that challenge our own biases about ourselves and our world. Were the Crusades a glorious defeat of an encroaching evil? Or was it a murder of thousands?

Its not always easy to tell who the good guys are and who the bad guys are. Don't make it so easy to tell which one your main antagonist is. Making a paper-thin motive for the BBEG is a mistake. Remember, it's about telling simple stories with complex emotions, not the other way around. Let your antagonist be every bit of dynamic and 3-dimensional as your best heros, and maybe even better!

Now what does your antagonist want, and why?

11.1.2 NPCs & Archetypes

You literally have a world full of NPCs. The only ones you need to worry about are the ones that will come into contact with the PCs. Out of those, you will be able to separate these into two groups; the permanent ones with a character sheet, and a quick-NPC.

A *quick-NPC* has a name and an occupation, a physical description, and a disposition, which may be rolled. If an attribute is needed, then assume most attributes will be at the LOW-ATTR of the NPC SKILL LEVELS table, with at least one attribute a level lower and another a level higher.

Select one of the NPC's attributes as the highest and this will be equivalent to HIGH-ATTR from the table. You could also take 7 (or a randomly rolled score), add the occupation attribute modifiers and then modifiers for the skills of levels 3, 5, 7, etc, but this is generally done only for permanent NPCs.

A full, permanent NPC is made like a player character. Follow all the usual rules, except you do not normally roll a personal trait except for the main antagonist and other special NPCs. Next, determine the average number of years this NPC has practiced this profession. Use the NPC SKILL LEVELS table to advance the NPC in skill, remembering to modify attributes for high skill levels. Most important is the development of a unique background, goals, and motives. Normally, a writer develops only the protagonist, not the support characters. In an RPG, the players are protagonists, so heavily developed support characters don't distract from the story line, but enliven it for the PCs. This is the GM's chance to go wild and be creative and create the most interesting characters possible.

Try to introduce characters in a way that make the players aware of feeling or experiencing something. Ask yourself how the encounter with this NPC is supposed to make the the players *feel*. NPCs are the ways that the players find information, purchase items, and interact with the world. NPCs and the way they act, dress, or their manner of speech, set tone, mood, and atmosphere.

Note the NPCs physical appearance, psychological makeup, cultural influences, moral compass, social contacts, motivations, and anything else you can think of. Try to make the NPC memorable and vivid with quirks, twitches, tricks, or physical abnormalities. Perhaps a woman has a lazy eye or streaks of gray in her hair, the soldier walks with a limp, and the thief is missing a finger, or maybe a whole hand!

A town of NPCs that all dislike strangers (-4 to NPC Reaction rolls) and act paranoid, maybe even deserting the streets after dark, sets a certain tone and mood and a "creepy" atmosphere to the town. Some NPCs may use a particular slang or colloquialisms. Different areas would have a different manner of speech, dress, or expression. You could even use a perception check to notice if someone was "out-of-town". Maybe 10 if you talk to them, 16 if just watching, but the DLs depend on how different the cultures are and if you are an outsider, too.

If the PCs meet the NPC during travel, or anywhere but walking down the street of their own town, or in their own stores and shops, then give the NPC a vivid and intriguing entrance. Make them noticeable! NPCs don't stand around waiting on the PCs to ask them something. Make them *do* something! Feel free to role-play accents and other details but try to keep the dialog short. Often, less is more. Dialog should move the story forward, provide exposition (set the scene and reveal the past), reveal theme, define tone, or create tension. Don't let dialog devolve into a game of 20

questions, nor should NPCs be giving long monologues! Good NPCs will make or break your story!

Archetypes vs Stereotypes

A stereotype is a combination of expected details that will make a character unsurprising, unintriguing, and boring. Some examples are the dumb fighter, the Irish cop, the Italian mobster, or Native Americans that greet you with "How". Avoid stereotypes as much as possible. It's a classic mistake to stereotype an NPC to attempt to make the character seem more plausible. Use the details on speech, mannerisms, culture, and style above to make realistic details, always remembering that an NPC is a unique individual. Even the two guards at the gate are unique individuals, both physically and psychologically.

An archetype's "type" depends on how the author uses the character to influence the plot. Use of archetypes can enliven the plot and add to the story's mood and tone. Creative use of archetypes can steer you away from stereotypes. Perhaps the two guards have different archetypes, or none at all.

A character without an archetype doesn't do much to influence the plot, but might still be used for mood and tone. For example, the old prophet preaching in the street about a coming destruction may have no real knowledge or information for the PCs, but when this symbol of doom is reinforced with other symbols of disaster, you have a good influence of tone. Choose the archetypes of your NPCs and remember to throw in a few extra NPCs for tone. Some archetypes include:

Protagonist Quite simply, every PC is a protagonist. These are the people the story is about!

Antagonist These are your villains. These are the characters who perform the events that get the plot going and become adversaries of the protagonists. These people are rarely actually evil, they just have goals that are at odds with the protagonists.

Conscience Some characters act as a voice of reason and morality for the protagonists or antagonist, like the angel on your shoulder. These characters can be very useful for GMs that need to advise players that are prone to chaotic or illegal acts; not to divert free-will, but to add additional tension and emotional or moral conflict. Remember Aunt Bee from Andy Griffin? She was the voice of Conscience for the show! Amazing how memorable that "NPC" became just because she played the archetype so well.

Tempter The tempter is in some ways the opposite of Conscience. This is the little red devil on your shoulder. Sometimes the tempter will distract the protagonists from their primary mission. The tempter isn't just another "evil" character and temptations aren't just to do

"bad" things, but they tend to offer much in exchange! Be creative!

Buddy In fiction, the Buddy is someone that helps the protagonist. In an RPG, the Buddy is best used as a helper for the main antagonist. The players may well believe the Buddy to be the main antagonist. In Virtually Real, everyone needs someone to watch their back because there is no huge disparity of power to protect you from a lone assassin's shot in the dark.

Skeptic The Skeptic attempts to stay out of the conflict, usually looking for a 3rd alternative. The PCs may need to influence the Skeptic one way or the other and them choose sides.

Emotionalist The Emotionalist responds to story elements by gut reaction, intuition, and emotion. Generally, the Emotionalist gives no reason why a particular course of action was taken, or why a particular decision was made.

Rationalist The Rationalist is the opposite of the Emotionalist. The Rationalist chooses a course of action based only on logic and reason. The Rationalist and the Emotionalist offer conflict for the PCs as to which course of action is best. Spock and Bones!

11.1.3 NPC Reaction Chart

There are many times when you meet someone and the reaction is completely negative. You end up thinking, "What did I do?" Other times, you meet someone and they are as friendly as if you had known them your whole life. How does a GM decide how an NPC will react? The easy answer is to follow the lead of the players, but what about the initial attitude of the NPC, before the PCs even open their mouths?

Most of us would hate to admit it, but a stranger's physical appearance and good looks (or lack thereof) have a lot to do with our attitudes toward that person when we first encounter them. For this reason, the main roll for the NPC REACTION CHART is the NPC's SOL + the PC's APN, shared effort. This roll has a reduced critical range (-2). Critical failures usually only apply if the PC has a karma point! Use the APN of the ugliest person in a group, or the lowest APN dice of one person and level of another. GMs should add the usual modifiers for racial discrimination, and anything unsettling about the PCs. Showing up to someone's door covered in blood and your weapons drawn would not be beneficial! This chart is mainly for random NPC reactions, not planned encounters with significant NPCs. Don't over-use the dice!

People from the same town or village are likely to recognize each other or have familiar mannerisms or styles of dress

and would get an advantage die. Perhaps if the NPC is looking to sell something to the PCs, grant advantage. Other modifiers would be recent violence, times of war, the NPCs status or caste, etc. If someone from your one of your alliances would recognize you on site, then apply any modifiers that would apply to dealing with that alliance (advantage normally, a disadvantage if you screwed them over). If the PCs have weapons visible, wear armor, or have visible wounds of a recent battle, that would be a disadvantage on the roll, but one and not one each. Add another if weapons are drawn. Exact modifiers will depend on the culture of the location. A town in peace may be more accepting than a town that gets raided frequently!

Reaction Descriptions

Attack The NPC rages out of control and attacks if they can. They may get a Home Advantage roll.

Angry The NPC yells at the players and are unwilling to help or listen. Treat the NPC as if they had 2 more levels of hardening in every emotional state. Any skills used to change the

Rude The NPC is uncooperative, makes sarcastic comments, and attempts to take advantage of the character in any business transactions. The PC takes two disadvantages to any attempts to change the reaction through diplomacy or business. No help outside a business transaction is likely. Useful information or help won't come.

Moody The NPC clearly doesn't want to deal with the PCs but isn't outright rude. The PCs take a disadvantage on further checks to modify the situation. You likely won't get much useful information unless the information is safe to give out and makes the PCs go away.

Moderate This is a strictly neutral reaction, mostly just Cautious. The NPC will conduct business but won't get too friendly or personal.

Pleasant The NPC is generally receptive to the PC and makes small-talk and conducts business well. You'll get rumors if they are common, but nothing secret that could endanger the NPC.

Friendly The NPC takes a general liking to the PCs. They'll attempt to aid the PCs but won't outright *volunteer* any information or give anything away for free. The PCs get advantage to checks to gather information, but not bartering or any check that would cost the NPC something of value.

Helpful The helpful NPC sees the PCs as genuine allies and will part with goods to aid the party if they are wealthier than the party is. They give information freely, but it will take some work on the PC's part to get information that could cause a danger to the NPC. The PCs get advantage on *bartering* checks.

Enamored An enamored NPC has a bit of a crush on one or more of the PCs, which is not necessarily sexual. The NPC is as helpful as possible, within reason (it's not a magical charm!) and may even offer to join the group if it would not detract from other responsibilities. They won't bankrupt themselves or anything, but they will do what they can for their new interest. Skill checks to influence this character get 2 advantage dice.

Animals

Creatures of LOG [2] or higher use the NPC REACTIONS chart. LOG [1] creatures generally use the NPC chart if they are humanoid and the animal chart otherwise.

11.1.4 Social Interactions

If you want an NPC to do something for you, you will need two things. First, you need a reason for them to do it. Second, you need a successful skill check! That check will get the modifiers listed from the initial reactions.

The PCs may use *Public Speaking, Deception, Etiquette*, and other skills to attempt to get information, barter, or otherwise solicit a particular action. The GM decides if the reaction is possible at the current reaction level on the chart. If not, you'll need to find a way on their good side. Each roll moves the NPC Reaction point total. As you win arguments for why they should do as you ask, they may not be willing to do it yet, but every point you score above their defense moves the NPC Reaction number, like changing hit points in a battle. The GM changes the reaction up or down based on the new total before deciding if the NPC agrees to comply. Like other skill checks, repeated attempts are allowed through continued interactions, but there will be the usual cumulative +1 critical modifier unless you change tactics to a new argument. On a critical, they become angry.

Social Interaction rolls will always involve two skills using the shared effort method and will be opposed by a similar double skill check. For example, assume you want to attempt a deception. Okay, what are you lying about? If it's physics and you don't know anything about physics, then this is going to be a difficult check. You roll Deception+Physics vs. Sense Motive+Physics. I sure hope he's not a physicist! If an opponent beats your deception check, then you get a disadvantage to future rolls against this person for being caught in the lie.

Bartering & Mercantilism is the Soul based aspect of a trade. This is generally paired with a Business skill, the Logic end of the equation. It will be opposed by the same roll. If you are doing a political trade rather than a financial trade, you use Bartering+Diplomacy.

Basically, you are describing to the GM what result you want to get and the method you go about it. The GM will decide which skills to roll and if any situational advantages or disadvantages might apply, such as from racism or classism, the goals and intimacies of the person you are trying to manipulate and their mental state. If the GM can't decide what skill is right, the answer is Diplomacy. If you don't have a subject to go along with this, then decide if this is an appeal to Logic, to have your opponent arrive at your conclusion (Logic), an appeal to one's imagination or culture (Mind), or an emotional appeal or appeal to personal honor (Soul).

Carrot vs Stick

So far, we have assumed carrot style interaction. Some skills, such as Intimidation and Torture are obviously "stick", and these depend on working the target's mental states. The moment you use a "stick", then the NPC Reaction number splits in two, we'll name then *left* and *right*. The amount by which you exceed your opponent's defense when using stick tactics increases the right number. This is how close you are to getting what you want. The right number always moves down. It doesn't matter who wins the opposed rolls, subtract the difference in rolls from that right number. Eventually, that number goes low enough to hit "attack". Either they aren't scared anymore or they think they'll die anyway. If the NPC can attack, they will. If they can't attack, they shut down. You'll need to totally change tactics to get anything out of them.

Intimacies

The most influential aspect of social interaction is finding and acting upon an intimacy. If you can convince your opponent that doing what *you* want gives them what *they* want, then you get a huge advantage. An NPC will rarely give you what you want unless something is in it for them. If doing what you want protects a minor intimacy of your opponent (like offering a bribe if money is a minor intimacy for them), then you get advantage on the check to convince them. However, if doing what you want is contrary to an intimacy, like insulting his honor because bribes are beneath him, you get a disadvantage instead! Major intimacies double these rewards and penalties, and a defining intimacy changes the modifier to 4 dice!

If you want an NPC to do something that is not in their own best interests, then you must address an intimacy to have any chance of success. You can make other rolls to try and find that intimacy. This is why many people guard their intimacies. They can be used to make you do things!

Intimacies always influence social interactions but not necessarily other rolls. Generally, a passion is required to use an intimacy in combat. This also means that the GM generally won't deny the use when activated by passion. The general litmus test to find if a passion can activate an intimacy for advantage is to ask if running away would have the same effect. If running away and living has the same effect as winning the fight, then this fight is not about your intimacy! This passion will be denied. These same passions may allow use of the passion outside combat. The exception is music. Your empathy roll to "feel" the music should make use of the character passions, as given in the MUSIC EFFECTS section.

Mental Attacks

Social interaction can also play into the mental status of a character. If you intimidate with threats of violence, then all those levels of failure (or hardening) come into play. Failures max at 4. If you end up with a fifth failure, you simply auto-fail all future checks of that mental status. Hardening grants at most 5 advantage dice.

Knowing a bit about your opponent and how they think and feel can certainly give you an edge by picking and choosing what mental states you want to trigger. Also consider that it's easier to know a person's outer intimacies than a deeper intimacy, but you can usually figure out the deeper intimacies based on the person's outer intimacies and their actions. Use *psychology* and similar skills to relay this knowledge to the player. In fantasy settings, viewing one's aura would allow the equivalent diagnosis as a full psychoanalysis session.

11.1.5 NPC Skill Levels

The NPC Skill Levels table gives information helpful in determining NPC skills on the fly, or the Bonus XP for creating detailed NPCs (or PCs that are rejoining the game after an old character died). It can also be used for random attributes and to calculate how much money is in someone's pocket. The information is broken down into by the number of years the person has been practicing their occupation.

As always, the table is just a guide for averages and can be modified by the GM as needed. Subtract the race's maturity age from their current age to find how long they have been in their occupation. Divide this number by 20 for dragons, angels, demons, animals, and any other non-humanoid without formal societies to train their young. Dragons spend a lot of time just sleeping, but they live a *very* long time! Adventurers will earn more XP than the table indicates since you learn faster when your life is on the line rather than just daily mundane crafting and sales!

Bonus XP This is the amount of Bonus XP to add to a full NPC build to increase skills beyond the basic 100. The NEW CHAR column shows 50% of this amount

High Skill [2] This is the highest skill a quick-NPC will have. Generally, this is the most used skill in the oc-

cupation. An NPC may have 2 or 3 skills this high. Combat-oriented characters will have weapon proficiencies this high.

High Skill [3] If the NPCs highest skill has a related attribute that has [3] dice, or the NPC is high rank or notoriety and has a related attribute of at least [2] dice, then the highest skill will have [3] dice training (master craftsman, etc) and will have the XP in this column instead.

High Skill [4] This is similar to the above, but *very* rare. Must have at least a [3] dice related attribute and a *lot* of experience to get [4] dice training and this level of XP.

Low-Attr This is a typical attribute for one of the NPC's *low* attributes. This is never one of the occupation's main attributes.

High-Attr This is the opposite of the above, being the occupation's main attribute. This would be a soldier's BDY, a merchant's SOL, or a rogue's AGL.

Pocket Money This one gets complicated because it has many uses! Multiply this number by the square of the "background" number for this NPC to find the *maximum* amount of money the NPC might carry. For example, Nobles would multiply by 144, blue-collar by 49, or 4 for peasants. The character's *total possessions carried* are equal to the starting money listed by background. The starting money squared is the total possessions of the *household*. A character's total possessions *owned* (including things not carried and left at home) is the starting money listed by background times the POCKET MONEY column. As always, these numbers are just guidelines and references to give the GM a reference.

New Char When a PC dies and needs to make a new character to join the group, find their highest skill from their old character, then cross-reference this column to find the maximum Bonus XP to give to the character as a background story bonus. This should be close to 2 XP per scene and that number can be used if they died early in the game. If the campaign is half-way through, this number will be sufficient. They may start slightly lower in skill level, but they will advance quicker than others until they catch up. This number may be modified by the previous character's *Honor* and any Bonus XP the old character had that wasn't spent yet. This is doubled when putting into a skill the previous character had.

Single Skill When spending Bonus XP on a new character build using the NEW CHAR column, no more than this amount of XP may be added to any one skill (rather than the 20 points for a beginning character).

2/3 Skill This level of XP is for skills the NPC may use often but are not the main skills used by the occupation. Combat oriented characters use this column for *BCT* and *combat-related* skills.

1/2 Skill This column lists the XP for lower-used skills that are still part of the occupation package. Non-combat characters generally won't have combat skills above this level, if at all.

11.1.6 Suspense & Danger

Novice GMs may think that danger means another fight. Generally, a combat encounter is not always the best way to tell a good story.

Combat encounters have three possible outcomes. The PCs win, and what is the reward? If the PCs always win, this eventually becomes boring, as you hack your way through to the next battle, and the next. The PCs could lose, and you'll quickly find that the players are upset because their characters are either dead or captured. Now, it could be game over if you don't throw the characters a bone, and letting the players make it when they *know* they should be dead isn't any fun either! Plus, you just wasted a lot of time on a story they won't want to start over. The third option is they run. Do players *ever* run away from a battle? *[Answer For New GMs: "only the one's that are still alive!"]*

Actually, the chase scene is one of the staples of a good plot. The problem isn't the players, but the GM! Imagine if a scene started out as, "over the next hill is a cloud of dust, likely from men on horseback traveling at a face pace. You've got about 15-20 minutes before they get here." Now, you can use *Intelligence*, *Tracking*, and all sorts of other skills. Compare with "Four armed men block the road ahead. Roll initiative." Even if the first encounter ends up being a combat encounter, the players are already thinking of how to best escape or prepare for the coming attack. In the *second*, their brains fall into *game mode* and we're likely going to try to win or die trying!

Every encounter should keep the pressure on and have a sense of *urgency*. The characters should never feel like it's okay to stop in town, take a break, and have some custom equipment made while they wait. That kind of stuff is for between stories, called "down-time". Instead there should always be a motivation to stay ahead of the clock. Get there before the villain, leave town before the hunting party tracks you there, or get the information from the dying man while they can still breathe!

According to the "Master Of Suspense", Alfred Hitchcock, what we see doesn't scare us, but what we don't see! Sometimes, the noises of the creature in the next room can be more frightening than walking into the room and seeing it! Going for the suspense is sometimes better than going for surprise, especially since a well-set ambush is both rare and

deadly. You can make whole scenes out of just the noises in the woods and the eyes you aren't really sure if you saw.

One author recommends that all scenes should end in near disaster to make a good "page-turner". Basically, every scene has a goal and an answer to the question, "Has the goal been achieved?" The question has three possible outcomes. These are "No", "Yes, but ..." something horrible happens as a result, and "No, but ..." when something bad happens *and* the goal failed. In the world of role-playing the GM doesn't get to decide if a goal is achieved. The actions, choices, strategies, and (to a lesser degree) the dice, decide if the goal actually gets achieved. Now, the GM just needs to determine what additional factors are needed to keep the pressure on, and if these conditions happen on success, or failure, or both.

Some examples: You succeed in the battle, but one gets away to warn the others. Maybe the magic item is found, but it's useless without the activation phrase, and the phrase isn't written on it like you hoped and the only person that would know... You narrowly escape the swarm of rats only to find yourself on a crumbling edge. You rescue the man from the villain only to find their mind is too traumatized to remember the details you need, so you'll need to ...

In each case, the scene is successful, but things don't go exactly as the players hoped. This is one way to build a sense of *hope*, while still giving the players a sense of direction and accomplishment. If the players don't feel like they've accomplished anything, they'll quit!

You could distill suspense down to deception, delay, and interruption. Normally, *interruption* is when an author does a "cut-scene" to leave you hanging. You could do this by a number of means. Perhaps the PCs are arrested, just as they spot the villain! Delay is when you keep moving back something important. Everyone knows it will happen. For example, acid is eating through the rope holding... Or maybe the encounter with the main antagonist is delayed because they are always just a half-step ahead. The example of the eyes in the dark is all three. Deception because you don't know what it is, and the GM may lead you to believe one thing and it turns out to be something else. It can be delay in that you may never encounter what is making noises and peering out from the darkness, and this may interrupt some other scene, or be interrupted by something else! Suspense is one of the ways to build *atmosphere*.

11.1.7 Mood, Tone & Atmosphere

Mood, tone and atmosphere are the toughest elements to get right. Your own personal style will determine a lot, as well as variations based on the particular campaign setting, story, or scene. Ignoring these elements may make it seem as if the GM has *no* style!

GMs can use a variety of words and details to describe something. The amount of detail and types of details and the manner in which they come across will determine the GM's style. Foreshadowing, symbolism, and suspense will be the paint brushes you use.

Details are about overloading the players with adjectives and adverbs. One or two per scene is sufficient. The use of symbolism and metaphor will be more effective. Dare to be specific! For example, instead of using a ton of adjectives to describe the car passing by, say a red 1996 Corvette Convertible. That conjures a specific picture in your mind better than building it from adjectives. Metaphors work as well. Instead of describing the cave walls with a thousand adjectives, you could say "the walls sweat a fungal slime." This tells us it's cold, damp, and slimy, without using those string of adjectives. Never use multiple adjectives that have the same meaning.

How much detail you use depends on the mood you are trying to get across to your players. Keep descriptions short for up-tempo action. In combat, focus on what is in the adversary's *hands*! That is the first thing they will focus on. Lengthen your descriptions when you want to suggest calmness. They have time to take it all in and look around. Remember that you can spread out details as the players take in the scene, adding more detail later. Allow them to interact and start role-playing before you drown them in an avalanche of details.

Your tone and style will set the mood of the game. Mystery genre's should have a mood of caution and vigilance. A thriller should be urgent and full of paranoia. Of course, never state what a character *should* feel. Imply it through details to *make* them feel it.

Atmosphere is the abstract part of a setting that builds the proper emotional and physical climate of your game. This is the part of your setting that makes the players feel unease, fear, joy, curiosity, or anger. You can even use a little atmosphere in the real world, such as by dimming lights when the players are in a cavern, or playing forest sounds when traveling through the forest, or crickets at night. The majority of the atmosphere, though, comes from your descriptions. You have five senses, plus a sixth. It's valid to describe a general feeling of unease if the character has high intuition. I might describe a sudden wave of cold that washes down their body, tingling the small of their back, and making the hair on their arms and neck stand up. They are going to wonder what that was and feel that fear. Remember it is the unknown that scares us the most. Sounds, tastes, smells, and textures are all as important as what we see, and what we don't.

Your perceptions will color your tone. Is this world safe and comforting, foreboding and threatening, or full of wonder and adventure? Always try to describe things from a consistent perception of the game world to reinforce a consistent tone.

Finally, be familiar with material you are presenting and it will show in your tone and style. People can sense when you really know what you are talking about. Make it real for

yourself and it will be real for them! You may want to read VERISIMILITUDE in the next chapter for more help.

11.1.8 Foreshadowing & Symbolism

You may not think these are related, but often symbolism is one of the ways of providing good foreshadowing without giving things away. Foreshadowing provides a sense of *credibility* to the plot. Chekhov's Gun states that if a gun goes off in Act 3, you better see a gun in Act 1. Likewise, it also states that if you see a gun in Act 1, it *needs* to go off in Act 2 or 3. Don't mislead the reader. Foreshadowing isn't to give hints to the players, but they will remember these details once the mystery is solved and think, "Oh, that's what that was!"

Providing good foreshadowing requires a well-conceived plot outline. Players will notice this and realize you didn't just come up with all this on the seat of your pants. This is where you get points for credibility. It's not easy, but doing your homework here will go a long way. Start with things that relate to the main antagonist, their motivations, and perhaps items required to carry out those goals. Begin at the final show-down scene, then work backwards, adding hints and glimpses where the characters might encounter them.

Symbolism can also be used to develop *theme* (discussed more in the next chapter) and credibility. Symbolism can add to tone, mood, and atmosphere as well. A symbol is like a visual metaphor. Decide what it represents and then have that symbol appear at all the moments you want that metaphor represented. If a raven is to be a symbol of death, describe a raven near every murder scene. Later, a sighting of ravens predicts imminent death because we've been told what these birds symbolize through our past experiences. Keep your symbols consistent. This is one instance where repetition is a good thing.

11.1.9 Don'ts!

Here are a few things you should avoid at all costs! It will be tempting, but try to avoid using these mistakes in your game.

Omniscient Will

The GM is all-powerful, but don't forget that the PCs have free will. Never describe a character performing an action which the player doesn't agree with. Don't lead the player's around by the nose. Don't force the players to take a particular course of action. Likewise, the player's choices must mean something. Don't use the same scenes and situations regardless of the player's choices!

Many GMs will make 3 mistakes of Omniscient Will. First, a well-detailed plot line that you have worked on for hours and days, may go down the toilet if the players go in unexpected directions. You'll have to find a way to get the players back on track without disrespecting free will. Second, a poorly detailed plot may have the GM working things on the fly. Consider what is at the other side of the hallway and what is to come at each fork in the road *before* the player chooses a direction. Don't force the same encounter regardless of choices. The players will catch-on and wonder why they are playing! Last, just because you are in a hurry, don't assume the actions and destinations of a PC and suddenly have them in a bar or tavern which they never indicated they were heading to.

Convenience

In addition to the mistakes above, sometimes a GM will ignore cause-and-effect and have things happen in the plot that one could only be described as "luck" or "coincidence". Perhaps the PCs are losing a battle and you think an NPC should show up in the nick of time to help. If it's a city, it may happen, but in a wild wilderness how likely is this? Again, the players catch on whenever you do things out of convenience. Don't do it! Always stick to clear cause and effect!

Idiot Plots

Never make something obvious to the players and not to NPCs. The players aren't the only ones with half a brain. Why hasn't anyone else figured out what's going on? Likely, someone else has! Decide what other NPCs might do about the situation. A little conflict here can spice things up and maybe lead to races and/or chases. It's no fun to be in a world full of idiots.

Cliches

The king orders you to save the golden child! You must find the magic whatsit to combat the evil who-zit before they take over the world. If X isn't fixed, the fabric between worlds will break and the world will be overrun by demons! Kings don't talk to common folk, you don't hire a paladin any more than you would hire an army general to do your personal bidding (and being hired for an odd job is a horrible plot hook since it's not personal at all), and we don't want the world destroyed every game. Remember that most of the people that you think are evil actually think *they* are the good ones and *you* are the evil one! The BBEG is a cliche. Villains that get the PCs in a moral dilemma is much more fun.

The concept of archetypes vs stereotypes applies to plot lines. A study of classical myths will show certain themes that seemingly never grow old. It's okay to steal themes, and sometimes plots if you change enough of the details, but make the story *unique*. Don't stereotype your plots any more than your characters. A unique plot line, maybe borrowed from an entirely different genre and adapted, will enliven the game, and make it fresh and exciting!

Avoid cliches!

Plot

The story's plot is the sequence of events that causes a particular conflict to arise and eventually conclude. Some GMs like to write everything down beforehand, including descriptions of rooms, objects, and so on. Other GMs like to "fly by the seat of their pants" and make everything as they go, with no idea of where the story will go. *Neither* of these approaches is best!

Writing everything beforehand leads to at least three problems. First, if you read from your notes, you'll slip into a monotone and lose the attention of your players. It doesn't matter how well you can speak and how much color you try to add to your voice. Something truly vital is lost when you read it, and the players will lose interest. Perhaps this is why the Druids always memorized their tales! Second, if you do all the work of designing it all in advance, then what happens when your players go in an unexpected direction? You'll either be unprepared, or you'll use your existing notes *anyway*. This goes against the character's free-will. The player's decision should *count* for something. Last, and this goes along with the previous point, if the players find themselves in a fixed plot, they get the idea that everything is preordained

and there isn't much point in playing because the outcome is already set.

Writing out *nothing* is incredibly difficult. Without some idea of where the plot will go, you won't be able to install a sense of "direction". Players need to get a sense that they are progressing towards some predefined and definite goal. Symbolism and foreshadowing usually get cut out completely. Further, the players may feel you are "cheating" and that their own actions have nothing to do with the plot elements coming out of your head.

Experienced DMs learn to keep a balance, keeping some of the plot in their head and use it to pull off the "seat of their pants" method, but in this case, they have a predefined plot, they just haven't written it all out because the players actions will change so many of the details. Meanwhile, a focus on theme holds everything together.

11.2.1 Story Beginnings

Session 0

Before the campaign begins, you want to devote at least 1 session to just making characters and discussing what sort of game you want to play. Some people want more combat, some want more puzzles, some like stories of complex social interactions and political factions. Get a feel for what everyone expects.

As the GM, I find it helps to discuss character ideas with the player and help them through every stage of the process. While anyone can read through the book, even seasoned veterans will often need some guidance about your campaign setting. Where does everyone start? Does everyone know each other? Will this character work well with the rest of the group? Session 0 is where you can give suggestions about all this. Meanwhile, start thinking about how this character will fit with the plot outline in your head. How would you hook this character and make them feel like a critical part of the story?

Lines, Veils, & Xs

Session 0 is also a good time to discuss what the player's *don't* want to see in the game. Virtually Real can deal with a number of traumatic themes and not everyone is comfortable having them in a game. The most common safety techniques are discussed below. There are a number of other alternatives for game safety that you can find by doing an internet search for "TTRPG Safety Toolkit".

Line A line is line that you don't cross. The player has made a line in the sand and said "No player vs player", or "No kids should be hurt", "No torture", or "No sexual conduct". Whatever it may be, that's the line. No reason has to be given as to why anyone isn't comfort-

able with that. A player has drawn a line and that subject matter is excluded from the game.

Veils A veil is sort of like a soft line. It acknowledges that certain elements can be present in the game, but they have to happen "off-screen". We can hear about it, know it happens, deal with it, but we're not going to get up close and personal about it and do any details. Its not directly a part of any scene.

X Sometimes something comes up that no one thought about. The 'X' card is literally a card or slip of paper with an X. If its turned over or thrown down or however you have implemented it, the current scene suddenly ends. Everyone gets a short break and then you pick up with a small summary of what happened during the break. No details. The scene is cut short, role-play stops, and you give out the minimal amount of information needed to continue the story without revisiting that scene. Do not ask why the X card was thrown. If whoever presented the X card mentions why, great. If not, move on. If its obvious what sort of subject matter led to the X card coming up then that subject is now a new veil.

Ready Session 1

There are many ways to begin a story, and they all start with a basic idea. You can use all sorts of sources for ideas. I like to start with an NPC. Then I ask myself, "What is this person's goal and why are they willing to hurt others to achieve it?" Remember to avoid cliches. Most people don't want to take-over/rule/destroy the entire world! Work with this NPC and write as much as you can about their history and background and the people they have contact with. Get to know this person as a multi-dimensional, multi-faceted person. This is your main antagonist, not a paper cut-out!

Now how will this person achieve their goal? You may wish to work backwards from the antagonist's goal to define the steps they will take to achieve the goal. This results in an event-driven plot from the player's perspective. The main antagonist defined the events that the protagonists (PCs) must respond to. From the antagonist's perspective, this is "character-driven" in that the antagonist's decisions and inner drives and changes determine their part of the plot. A normal book author can stop there, but in an RPG the players are co-authors. The acts and choices of the PCs create a "character-driven" part of the plot that is "event-driven" to the antagonist. The GM must somehow merge these together. It's not as hard as it may seem!

Your campaign plot should touch on some sort of universal theme. What does your story say about life and what lessons do the characters learn? Creative GMs may also want to put a theme into the story either in addition to or in support of the campaign theme. Themes are often repeated throughout a campaign and are discussed more in the next chapter. Themes are discussed in chapter 12, CREATING CAMPAIGNS.

Some GMs may also wish to work in a sub-plot. A sub-plot normally seems unrelated to the main plot, and may even have goals that at first seem contradictory to the main plot. Normally, the sub-plot will have the same theme as the main plot, helping them reinforce each other. Any relationships between these plots is not normally evident at the beginning of the story. You may wish to think about your symbolism at this point as well, especially if the story has its own theme.

11.2.2 Acts

Normally, a story breaks into three main parts called *Acts*. These are the *beginning*, *middle*, and *end*. Simple enough, right?

The *beginning* consists of the first two chapters. The first act gets everyone introduced to the problem, the antagonist, the antagonist's goals, and hooks the protagonists into the situation. By the end of Act 1, the protagonists should have clearly defined goals through which the problems presented may be solved. This is your advantage. Act 1 sets the characters on the path!

Act 2 is where the majority of the story takes place. The "direction" established in Act 1 may get reversed and then turned back again. New things will be discovered and previous events will be recognized as a foreshadowing of things to come, or things that have already happened by the end of Act 2. Symbols may be recognized. By the end of Act 2, players *think* they are ready for the final battle with the main antagonist. This act is where you *craft* your story.

Act 3 is where it all comes together, for good or ill. All their hard planning will come to a conclusion and the story will climax, and then conclude. All the "loose-ends" of the plot will come to a resolution by the end of Act 3. Hopefully, this will be a significant challenge, yet your players still come out as heroes. Don't *let* the PCs win. Make it difficult! If they fail, hopefully they'll have an escape plan so they can try again. If the PCs die, you'll have to come up with a new story.

Each *Act* of your story is normally composed of at least two *chapters*.

11.2.3 Chapters

A novel may have 30 or 40 chapters, but in an RPG, we are mainly interested in 6 chapters that define the main plot-points. Each chapter will bring the plot to a known stopping point. You should hopefully be able to finish 1 chapter per game session. At the end of the chapter, allow players to spend any earned Bonus XP.

Each chapter is a story in itself, with it's own beginning, middle, and end. A chapter has its own specific tension which sets it apart from the other chapters. Some chapters might emphasize a particular character over others, although the total "screen time" of all the PCs should be about equal over the course of the whole story. Screenplays might use the terms "sequence" or "reel" for a chapter. *Reading books on how to write screenplays can be very helpful!*

Chapter 1 – The Hook

The majority of GMs like to start a story with everyone meeting each other. This is awkward for the players and kinda boring. Other GMs start with all the PCs already friends. Either way, you'll want to make the first chapter a "hook". The "hook" should usually be something personally relevant to the player's character. Don't ever force a PC on some mission. Remember the "don'ts"!

I find, especially for the first story, there should be a separate hook for each individual PC. I then run each player separately through the first scene, often an action scene. This gets the players involved quickly and gets the tension up. This gives the players a reason to come together, which becomes the second scene. For subsequent stories, you can usually find a "hook" that is personally relevant to the whole party because they will have some common background and shared experiences by that point.

If you start each PC separately, consider having the other players leave the room. They'll be eager to learn what happened to the other player's character. Don't let them discuss it outside of the game! Discuss it *in* the game, through role-playing. I sometimes bring together PCs as if the character was meeting an NPC, and don't reveal that the character described is a PC until until the PC needs to respond. This can make for a fun surprise!

The hook says, "What's wrong with this picture?" Something outside the usual status-quo is found that is personally relevant and the protagonist is uniquely suited to figure out what's wrong or solve the conflict. This may be an external problem or an internal one, a personal or psychological one within the PC. At the end of the chapter the conflict is identified and the PCs are "hooked". Never use money or treasure as a hook, make it *personal*.

Chapter 2 – The Catalyst

The second chapter has all the goals identified and everyone comes together. Then, a new problem arises to up the stakes. This conflict sets the tone for all the action to come and often suggests a quest or mystery to solve. The antagonist's goal may likely be revealed in this chapter, creating an even greater sense of urgency.

The second chapter shouldn't give things up too quickly. Remember, this is a whole chapter which may involve a 4-6 hour playing session! You may wish to introduce a "support character" or two at this time. The end of chapter two may leave inner and outer conflicts at odds with each other or at odds with the main goal. This should be an opportunity for the players to get to "feel" their characters through the tough decisions. Again, dialog with support characters may help set the mood and tone and get the information across that you need. Perhaps *finding* this NPC is part of the challenge!

Chapter 3 – Turning Point

This chapter generally throws a reversal at the protagonists. If the end of chapter 2 didn't leave the PCs at odds with the main goal, then chapter 3 starts out that way. There is a good chance that the original goal is not the best course of action and may make the situation worse. Following the original goal may require personal sacrifices that are too costly. Another solution may be offered the PCs, creating additional conflict. The original solution may seem impossible and the PCs may wish to turn back. A decision has to be made, and this decision is a significant turning point in the story.

A change in mood and tone is also good for effect. If the majority of chapter 2 was enthusiastic and up-beat, chapter 3 should be foreboding, and down-beat. If chapter 2 is up-beat, then chapter 3 is down-beat. A stick versus a carrot!

This chapter usually ends with some pretty major decisions being made by the protagonists. It should feel like important things have been decided and that the "Turning Point Decision" is final and binding.

Chapter 4 – Midpoint

Here is where the relationship between the protagonists and the antagonist becomes a bit more personal. This event will often "bind" the protagonists and antagonist together. They likely won't be on the same side, although that is possible, but it all suddenly becomes deeply personal. Internal and external conflicts all come together to cause a re-evaluation of the "Turning Point Decision".

The GM may also need to "throw 'em a bone". This can be a discovery of something or a recognition that changes the facts or changes how they weigh. If the last chapter was down-beat, the new discovery happens fairly early, allowing the majority of the the chapter to be up-beat. If the last chapter was up-beat, the majority of this chapter is down-beat to signify that something is wrong, until the new discovery grants new hope.

At the end of the chapter, the characters are ready for their battle with the main antagonist. Either they've found the item they needed, caught up on their lead, or discovered something to give them an edge, or gained access to their stronghold. Some GMs may wish to end this chapter on a down-beat as well, especially if the chapter has been mostly up-beat. Namely, that as a consequence of this chapter,

sometimes called the "Second Turning Point" or "Swivel Decision", the PCs do not feel ready to combat the main antagonist, but conflict is imminent anyway. Perhaps the antagonist is chasing the protagonists (the PCs) and they come to a dead-end, literal or metaphorical, and direct conflict is right around the corner.

Chapter 5 – The Dark Moment

The Dark Moment may or may not be the character's direct confrontation with the main antagonist. It won't be the *final* battle. Basically, everything goes wrong! This may be because of a bad "swivel decision", or due to some sort of unforeseen complications or unknown information comes to light. This chapter should pile it all on with all sorts of unexpected complications. Usually, it looks like imminent success, but then everything just goes to crap.

The PCs should feel like all is lost. This is the crisis climax and it should seem like a losing battle. If the main antagonist is directly involved, something should happen to separate the antagonist from the PCs. Perhaps the main antagonist has something better to do than kill off the PCs in order to complete a goal in time.

Readers may well think that this is unfair. What if the PCs have expertly planned everything and ready for all of the antagonist's obstacles? Definitely allow the PCs to overcome those obstacles they were ready for and grant XP for all the planning and performance, but there should be one last obstacle that comes as a total surprise and looks like a deal breaker. Keep the PCs on their toes and let this chapter be a dark moment the way it should be. The time to be *fair* is the next chapter.

Chapter 6 – Resolution

This chapter contains the final show-down. The main antagonist is finally defeated. Although they may get away, or you may find out it was only a henchman for the real antagonist, who they meet in chapter 1 of the *next* story. Whatever complications made chapter 5 so grim turn out to not be as bad as it originally seemed.

The resolution may require some heroic act or personal sacrifice (which may be material or emotional, not physical). Basically, the "something really big" happens. If the PCs have been planing well, this may be the "bone" they were waiting for. At some crucial moment for both, the balance shifts to the players. If they are ready, they can use this to great advantage. Maybe the antagonist's plan backfires, or the PCs sacrifice triggers something important. Be creative, but remember the "Don'ts"!

Finally, do a "come-down" scene. If the antagonist stole an idol from a temple that will cause the god to destroy the town if it's not returned, then the PCs must now return it in time. All the loose ends and dangling questions now get answered. Now that the antagonist is out of the picture, perhaps a new discovery is made to clear the air and answer a few of the puzzles that are left. Leave no threads dangling in either the main plot or any sub-plots, except those intentionally leading to the next story in the campaign. If you allow the main antagonist to escape, don't make a habit of this. Other ways of connecting your stories into a solid campaign are in the next chapter.

Changing The Formula

Often a story might have multiple turning points, or perhaps a second catalyst, or maybe this story happens to have two midpoints. Just make sure to follow the basic formula and you can change up the middle a bit, alternating up-beat and down-beat chapters. Generally, you have 2 chapters in Act 1; 4 chapters in Act 2; and 2 chapters in Act 3. Remember that each chapter is it's own mini-story, with its own focus and tension, and its own beginning, middle, and end.

Most writers don't stick to predefined formula, and many don't even use one (although they may be doing so subconsciously). However, compare the above plot formula to your favorite movie. Now all the side characters are NPCs. See if you can spot their archetypes. Everyone uses the same playbook because it works! If you keep your ideas fresh, you won't have too many problems. Even if your players have read this chapter, they'll quickly be immersed in the plot and will forget about the formula defined above. Obviously, intentionally making decisions about your character based on information in this chapter is meta-gaming!

You should know when it's okay to change the formula. Remember that the plot needs direction, the direction may have turning points and reversals, the tone may change at times, and you need to keep the pressure on through an ever-escalating story-line. Know what all your NPCs are doing later if the PCs don't interfere. Work out your symbolism and foreshadowing elements, then you can improvise or write-out as much of the rest as you like.

Normally, scenes are structured so that the GM can accurately guess the decisions of the players. This will make it relatively easy to write your plot ahead of time. In the event the players do something unexpected or go in an unforeseen direction, be ready with alternative scenes. Know what else is happening in the area.

A few GMs may think to turn plot-*lines* into plot-*trees!* It's okay to change what you have planned based on the character's decisions, but don't try to guess every possible outcome of every possible choice the players might make. *You'll fail!* They will do something totally unexpected and you'll be lost and angry. Worse, the direction of the plot will be horribly injured and the players will feel lost. Don't make plot-trees! Just keep an extra scene or two in the back of your head for when things go wrong, and fill the gap with your backup scenes while you figure out how to get things going in the

right direction again.

Remember free-will! Don't force the players to follow what you have planned, but if they don't follow it on their own, you may need to supply additional clues as to what course of action will get them out of the hot-seat! You prevent these issues by making the plot relevant to the player's background. That's your "plot rails". That's why we spend so much time on character creation, allowing both the player and GM get to know the characters and what drives them.

A plot doesn't need to be complicated to keep the players guessing. As one author said, *"Tell simple stories with complex emotions, not complex stories with simple emotions."* Remember that inner conflicts fuel outer conflicts. You have to know what those conflicts are! Conflict is where your story comes from. Make things logical so that the players believe it. As Tom Clancy points out, *"The difference between reality and fiction? Fiction has to make sense!"*

11.2.4 Scenes

Most chapters have about 6 scenes (or "encounters"), possibly with an extra few scenes thrown in around Act 2. If these chapters have more scenes than that, they'll require an additional session to complete and the players may get the feeling that they aren't progressing. Your chapters are markers and the players will feel themselves reaching the end of the story.

You don't need a marathon to make a good story. Feel free to cut out any scenes that the movie director or producer would have cut. If it isn't vital to the plot, cut it! Keep it in the back as a backup plan if you feel you can salvage it. We don't need to know every time the character's use the restroom, buy a pack of cigarettes, or eat a meal. Make use of a standard marching order and watch rotation to jump into the action instead of going through every hour. Role-play scenes that will affect a character's decisions and actions that will affect the plot, but don't waste time on mundane tasks. It's boring. You should be keeping that pressure on!

For example, instead of role-playing 3 days of travel, just say, "Three days later, you arrive at .... It's a cloudy morning, brisk autumn air. The city walls grow in the horizon. Off in the distance, a pair of figures can be seen on each side of the city gates." Or consider something happening on someone's watch. There is no need to go through all the hours that nothing happened. Write down the time that the event will happen so no one feels singled-out. Check the watch order to figure out who was on watch and direct the encounter to them.

Every scene should have a goal, a motive, and a conflict. The more dangerous the threat, the more obvious it should be. It is possible to have a threat that can not be overcome as well as its well-marked as such. The D&D idea of "if it has hit-points, you can kill it", is not generally a good way to design things! Consider environments and not just what

the player's might interact with at every setting, but also how did everyone else get there? Do you have monsters in rooms that are too big to even fit down the hallways?

Scenes should have enough information describing them such that the player's can make informed choices. That's the limit. Its all about choices the players the characters make, there should always choices and options, and these choices should have impact and consequences. These choices should lead to dilemma. Don't go overboard in descriptions, just beware of stringing together words you found in the thesaurus trying to make something sound impressive. The players will hear "words ... words ... fancy words ... ok, this is important. Let's search it." It's just as fast to say, "The first thing that catches your eye is .... It makes you feel ..." Describing the feeling it evokes can be much more impressive than all the words in the thesaurus! Sometimes, it can be helpful to introduce additional details later, but present the overall environment. Here, you need to focus on the goal of the scene. If its a monster, then describe parts of the scene that relate to how you might find it

Each scene also needs a transition to the next scene. This can be as simple as walking into the next room. Scenes generally won't end the way the player's expect. See the section on Suspense & Danger for details. Decide which scenes will have elements of foreshadowing or symbolism elements. Every scene has a purpose, either to build mood or build the plot. You need a little of both!

Ask yourself, "What is the purpose of this scene? Does it fulfill that purpose? Could I achieve that goal in a better way?"

There are 3 kinds of scenes:

Action

The action scene is by far the most popular. Everyone loves action! However, the action scene is by far the most improperly used element of role-playing. I've seen GMs open a book of monsters and say, "This is what you see. Roll initiative!" Using a virtual table-top is no different.

Not only is this a horrible way to introduce a combat encounter, but combat is not the *only* type of action! Traps and other dangerous situations are also action, but there are more types of action that are rarely used. Imagine a horse getting spooked, a car crashes nearby, a pick-pocket is caught taking something from your pocket (or were they putting something in it?), or how about the good old chase scene?

Movies and novels love chase scenes, but they seem to be rare in RPGs. First, remember that skills such as *Navigation* and *Concealment* can be incredibly useful if you have a bit of lead time. Tracking and counter-tracking can come into play. Many GMs aren't used to using chase scenes because running speeds in many systems are fixed. Not only are speeds rolled in Virtually Real, but you can add a number of other skills into the mix as well, through shared-effort

checks. This lets a chase be abstracted away as a set of opposed rolls, rather than millions of checks for every corner and obstacle to be dodged. If it's a vehicular chase, your driving skills will matter as much as the speed of the vehicle. A great chase can be a great addition to the game! The scene after the chase, where the characters are exhausted, or just out of END, will be very important!

Enigma

The enigma is a puzzle to solve or a mystery to investigate. These types of scenes can be just as exciting to a player and they don't leave them feeling like the GM is trying to kill them!

Puzzles can be anything from secret codes to strange incidents that leave the character wondering why it happened, to full murder investigations. It can be an unidentified object, or even an odd person. Ultimately, the players must use their own wits and their character's skills to figure it out. This can be much more rewarding than swinging a sword or shooting a gun at everything that is out there. In fact, its probably easier since combat actually requires some pretty detailed tactics to survive!

Every story should have at least one Enigma scene. I like to put in at least 1 per chapter! Solving puzzles and mysteries earns XP and its fun! While you should always use a mixture of scenes, how many involve an enigma will depend on the story's tone.

Role-Play

The entire game may be role-playing, but a "role-play" scene is one that is primarily about the interactions between the PCs and one or more NPCs. This is usually a dialog for the purpose of gathering information, or for gaining an ally. The GM usually begins the scene with an NPC REACTIONS roll and may use additional skill checks or general SOL checks throughout the scene.

Don't get too beat up on dice rolls though. Remember that the role-play aspect is the most important. Dice rolls are only for when you don't already know the outcome! This type of scene will generally use fewer die rolls than any other type. The words and actions of the players will have the greatest overall impact, but don't neglect the skills of a character that was built for diplomacy! The encounter should challenge the players, but shouldn't necessarily frustrate them. When done properly, these scenes can be a lot of fun for everyone.

Remember to make your NPCs memorable. If you met this person, what would you remember about them if you met them? Refer to them by this outstanding trait to concrete it in their memory. Give the NPC something to do during the scene, maybe they are too busy to stop working while they talk. Maybe they keep glancing to the side or

looking around nervously before they speak. Do they gesture and nod, pace about, or keep stepping away? The PCs can learn as much by the character's body language and what they don't say as by their words. Any gestures and twitches or inflections can sometimes by interpreted by a *Sense Motive* check. The GM sets the DL based on the given situation and cultural familiarity.

Role-play scenes aren't a game of twenty questions. Sometimes an off-hand remark or action performed by an NPC can convey the information you need to get across. Many times, NPC reactions are used to set mood and tone more than to dole out plot secrets.

Combination

The "thief" that sneaks something onto your person without stealing anything is an example of a combination scene. First, it's *action*. The thief is running down the street and "accidentally" runs into a PC. The NPC would normally roll *Deception* + *Sleight of Hand* against the PC's *Perception* + *Sense Motive*. If the PC wins, they automatically know something is up, but may not know they were given something instead of being robbed until they check to see what is missing! Of course, they could roll really high, and maybe 6 over would be enough to tell without checking.

If the PC catches the "thief", they may run after them, creating a chase scene. Perhaps the thief already has someone chasing them and that is why they needed to get rid of the item! Otherwise, the PC thinks someone accidentally bumped into them. The PCs may find the item later, a recognition will take place as the PC remembers the scene from earlier. Either way, this becomes an *enigma* type of scene really quickly. If the "thief" is caught there is a *role-play* scene.

I make most of my scenes combination type of encounters. Perhaps a swarm of rats pushes the group into a trap, or onto a narrow ledge, or into another swarm or other combatant. The windy chasm which the PCs must pass on a 100' high ledge might include an ambush and a fight, making WIND EFFECTS checks every round. Maybe the villain's loyal henchman makes a daring save to give the main villain a chase to run. Now you've got to finish fighting him and the main villain.

In the very first scene, I describe the environment briefly, and then jump *in media res*, "in the middle of things". Lights, camera, *action!* The story unfolds as a result of the initial action in the game. If you start a game with a role-play encounter, you set a much slower tone. It becomes a finishing game where the GM throws a hook out and waits for the PCs to tug on the line to be reeled in. Action gets them running into your story with no strings attached. Of course, action out of nowhere usually has some enigma portion where you ask "why?"

Cut-Scenes

You always want to keep the suspense high and give everyone a fair share of playing time. You start by making sure everyone has a role to play, something to contribute. The computer hacker must switch off the alarms and cameras, but no camera can be out for more than 5 seconds or the alarm will sound. The hacker must now work with the rogue. The rogue must sneak past the guards to switch off the force-field so the soldier-types in the group can get in through the back where they won't be outnumbered. Everyone has a job to do, timing is critical, and you have to maintain that sense of timing.

Go around the room, asking each player to describe the actions of their character. When it gets suspenseful, or before any roll of a skill check or save, cut to the next player. Once you've gone around the table, the players will have begun to feel the suspense. Now, on the second pass around, let the player begin by making the save or skill check for the character's last action. Describe the effect of their roll and then get the character's next action. Again, when it's time to roll, "cut" and move to the next player to keep the suspense.

Obviously, there are some situations where you'll have to change the order a bit because the GM needs to know if the actions was successful before you move on. Maybe the hacker or the electrical engineer has a job to perform while the warrior guys are having a shoot-out. The tech begins work and you cut to a round of combat, then cut back and let the tech roll their skill check. Things might get sort of grim if the tech isn't done yet! Okay, who's ready to sneak past the guards? The cameras should be off. We'll roll to find out if the hacker was successful right after you walk in front of the camera!

Need a good dark moment? Did anyone remember to cut the motion sensors? Yeah, initiating full lock-down!

11.2.5 The Dungeon

The "Dungeon" adventure has long been a staple of fantasy role-playing. The GM draws a map, populates the rooms with monsters and treasures and a few traps, and the players go spelunking in search of the elusive "artifact" and more gold than they could possibly carry. Usually, this means the characters hack the monster, get healed, then take the treasure and move on to the next room. Wash, rinse, repeat, until you are out of healing magic and then rest until everyone heals up a bit and regains spell abilities. Bored yet?

Generally, these sorts of stories have little but combat and nearly no role-playing. Often, anyone not involved in the fight is simply bored with nothing to do, so everyone needs some combat ability to keep things going. Often, the "dungeon" itself rarely resembles any type of architecture a sane person would build, and the rooms have no purpose other than to hold monsters to kill.

That isn't to say you can't have a little "dungeon" styled story right in the middle of Act 2. In fact, it could be *most* of Act 2. To do things right, design a building with a purpose, not a random collection of rooms and corridors. Populate the rooms with items that are logical for the room. Likely, everything has already been sorted through by previous occupants or dungeon delvers. There won't be much of value left, except some well-hidden items. Add some enigma to the story; things missing that shouldn't be, things not missing, sliding book-cases, hidden rooms, and other puzzles. Maybe evidence of previous battles or a murder!

Keep the monsters to a minimum. Lot's of empty space lets the PCs drop their guard and increases suspense. That's when they hear "that noise" coming from down the hall. Be specific and descriptive on the noise. You might add a monster or NPC secretly following the party that they can catch small glimpses of. When they check behind them roll a perception check! You could add 1 or 2 surprise encounters, too! Remember to use combination encounters to avoid the "hack-n-slash" feel and have a goal other than "treasure". Keep it realistic and remember that anything in the dungeon likely knows about everything else around there. They either have a way to stay apart from each other, or they are willing to help one another. Any creatures in the next room that hear combat are likely to come running, because it's better to fight the PCs together than to let the PCs knock them off in tiny little groups!
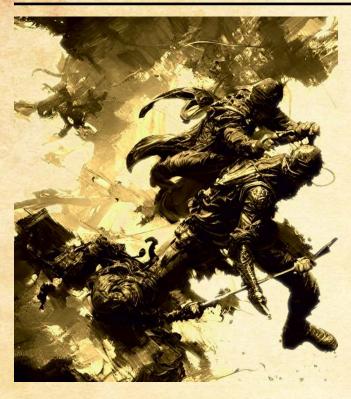
11.2.6 Pacing & Timing

The GM should always be aware of the passage of time in the game world. This can be related to the players using some sort of relative time. For example, "a little past midday", or "a few hours before sunset." In modern campaigns, a character could look at their watch, cellphone or nearly clock and get the exact time. GMs should still give clues about the relative passage of time to give the players a "feel" for about what time it is, even if they don't have a watch or clock. The current amount of daylight is particularly important. Over longer periods of time, the weather and change of seasons should be subtly reported.

You need to have a good handle on time to deal with *pacing*. Pacing is difficult to really give any good advice on. It comes with experience. Pacing is how much information the players get at once. How much information is too much? Players will be lost and frustrated if you give out too little, but your story can be ruined if you give out too much. How do you release information to the players at a rate that will entice the players without making them confused or thinking it's too easy?

The idea is to keep the players guessing, but allow small clues to be released consistent with the direction of the plot and the guidelines of the current chapter. You can't pull back information, but you can throw out a "red herring" if

it looks like the players are picking up on things faster than you expected. If they get lost, throw 'em a bone!

Every so often, you'll have to arrange for a "breather" from the action so they can pull themselves together and discuss it. They should still have some sort of deadline to face, as well as other complications. The "breather" should feel like a necessary break that is expensive in time. Let the characters take a breath just long enough to put a few pieces together, then dump the pressure back on. Get it done and move out! If the characters feel like they can spend all day talking then you are doing something wrong! Throw in a transition to something else to get the pressure back on. A desperate pounding on the door followed by *"They're here! Get out now! Run!"* should do the trick.

You handle the players the same way. They can discuss options and have fun for as long as everyone is having fun. Just stay out of it and narrate. Once they start looking confused, before that hits frustrated, you need to step in. Don't tell anyone any secrets, but you can give additional descriptions that help to eliminate options for them.

The GM's Toolbox

There are a few things a GM should always remember to keep in mind. These tools are invaluable in keeping the game going smoothly.

11.3.1 Adjudication

Rules are everywhere. Skills are plentiful and passions and styles are just rampant! A player wants to attempt something and you don't know how to handle it. Adjudication means that the GM is the judge, so *you* decide what is fair. This section is just some examples of how to make good rulings.

Don't Roll   If a character could logically perform the task without difficulty, then they do that. They succeed! Counting the coins in your pocket doesn't require a skill check if you can count. Of course, if you are counting while running down the street with someone shooting at you, then I'm going to need you to make a *Basic Math* check, please. *Use dice only when you are unsure of the outcome!*

A DL 4 is normally not worth rolling if you roll 2 dice. Of course, if injured and staggering down the street with 4 karma points, we're gonna roll dice anyway! The GM may also adjudicate that a task is totally impossible and no check can succeed. What are the chances you can jump high enough to break out of Earth's gravity? Maybe a super-hero genre sets a DL 50, but in most other cases, it's just a no. The GM is free to adjudicate the situation to keep the plot moving and the story intact. Just remember that if its even remotely possible to do, let them roll that 1 in 1000 chance! See THE RULE OF COOL, below.

Set difficulties without consideration of situational effects. You can either decide using the DIFFICULTY LEVELS (DL) TABLE or consider what an average roll would be for the opposition. An average skill is roughly a +4, so master craftsman will be averaging around 15. If he is making locks, that is the DL to pick the lock. You'll get a feel for setting these over time. Don't sweat these too much, just make sure that there is always an alternate means of resolving problems should the check fail.

The same is doubly true of conditional modifiers. The rules give a ton of information as to what modifiers go where and for how long. However, a situation will come up where you have to come up with conditions on your own! It's literally one die per reason. Yes, some modifiers can be more than a die, but a die basically takes you half-way to the next skill capacity! But, don't be afraid of giving out too many. The more dice you add to a roll, the less each die will affect the final result. In other words, they stack much nicer than you think! So, it takes 3 conditions to be equivalent to dropping a die off your roll.

So, if you are trying to decide between 2 or 3 disadvantages, I would ask yourself if you really want the player to make this roll? If yes, then accidentally forget a reason for a modifier and rule only 1 disadvantage to the roll! If the answer is no, you impose 4 conditions! Yes, it's cheating. Certainly don't do it all the time, and don't do it in a way that would impact player agency (character free-will). But, sometimes you need to adjust the odds to keep the pressure on without murdering the PCs. The levers you pull are your

conditional penalties and your strategy.

Separating player knowledge from character knowledge is a frequent issue. Since we have decided that characters have a mind totally separate from the players, this causes some problems. Remind players that their character doesn't know everything the player does. Use knowledge checks to move character knowledge into player knowledge. One way to do this is with fail forward semantics, where a failure may not give you success, but it gives you knowledge that gets you closer! Obviously you can't keep the mind of the player and character totally separate! If you did that, we'd have no story at all! You'd just roll to see if the character is smart enough to figure it all out!

A player's background story does not grant free skills. Just because you grew up on a farm doesn't mean you know anything about agriculture or animals. Your secondary skills should have reflected this information. If for some reason you did not choose those skills, and chose some other skills, it should be noted in the background as to why they didn't learn the obvious stuff around the farm. Make sure that the player understands they are making a choice. You don't get to claim common knowledge beyond any other member of the population just because you grew up on a farm. However, you would be justified in granting advantage for a roll in which you feel that the particular background would make a difference, especially in situations that are more about culture and feel than experience performing a task.

You'll find plenty of situations where you and a player might have a different interpretation of rules or a different recollection. Briefly discuss your reasons, try to offer a compromise, and be lenient. In most cases, keeping the players happy isn't going to break the game. When you feel it matters, make a ruling and stick to it. Don't spend more than a minute or two on it. You can get feedback after the game and possibly handle things differently next time. Ultimately, this is your game and all the little rules are just suggestions. You have a right to change them as the situation dictates, just try to be consistent and fair!

As a last ditch effort, the GM may also offer to rewind a scene. If no one likes how it ended, usually because everyone died, then discuss how things should have been done differently, either by the players or GM, or both. Asking the dice to roll differently is not allowed. If everyone agrees, you start the scene over at the beginning. If you make it past the point where they died last time, everyone involved takes a karma point for changing the timeline. The exception is if you are rewinding due to a GM mistake, in which case the player's decide who gets a karma point (they need not know the name, just be able to designate some NPC). The GM will decide how they earned it.

11.3.2 Awards & Goals

A character is often rewarded "in-game" in the form of monetary payment or the discovery of lost treasure. However, the acquisition of massive amounts of imaginary wealth is not the point of a role-playing game. It's about character growth, much like real life, and not just the kinds of growth that show up on a statistical block! At the end of a story, ask the players if their characters have changed. How has their view of the world been altered by the adventure? Did intimacies change? Characters must be able to support themselves, but treasure is ultimately a poor goal in itself. Unlike some systems that attempt to balance power with strict wealth restrictions, Virtually Real puts a believable plot and story as the primary goal with character development at the front!

Players are also expected to set individual goals that have nothing to do with the story. Characters are rewarded for achieving goals in two ways; in game, as whatever benefit that goal would normally bestow; and in the form of bonus XP. Encourage the player to develop their character in new and creative ways. It can be as simple as changing their hairstyle! Characters are not normally full-time "adventurers". This is simply a means to an end, not an occupation. Encourage the players to determine to what "end" their character continues to risk their life!

Examples of Bonus XP awards are given in Section 1.4.

11.3.3 Throwing A Bone

The players may come to a dead-end, figuratively or literally, or may find themselves in a seemingly impossible situation. These are the times when the GM may want to give a little help. You can't just have a divine voice call out from the sky or have powerful artifacts or equipment appear on the road. That NPC that saves the day in the nick of time is just too convenient and cliche. You can't give the player's a free lunch or anything that even looks like a free lunch. If you do, you destroy the whole story line by granting divine favor and your conclusion becomes predestined. In effect, the player's choices no longer matter because the GM will fix it anyway. So why play?

If you want to help the players, you'll have to do it stealthily. You should also make it feel like the players earned it. There are a number of ways to do this and you'll have to be creative to find a method that works for your players and your plot. One of the two simplest methods of controlling the outcomes are to modify your strategies when playing NPCs, and to be selective on application of conditional modifiers. It's intentionally easy to for the GM to throw in an extra advantage or disadvantage in order to make the game more enjoyable for the players. Just don't tell them when you do it!

Example 1 – The Fortress

The PCs are attempting to access an enemy fortress. In spite of excellent planning, they are spotted, an alarm sounds, and guards begin to mobilize. A search party is sent after the would-be intruders. The guards at the entrances have been doubled. The search patrol is coming this way. A *dark moment?*

Knowing a river is nearby, a player decides to look for a place to hide in its steep banks. If tracked to the river, the search party will lose the trail at the water and likely assume the PCs are trying to escape by taking the river downstream. The GM has the player roll *Wilderness Survival + Concealment* to hide everyone in the terrain. The search party will need *Wilderness Survival + Search*. Now here's part of the "bone". The GM adjudicates that the search party is mostly soldiers.

The GM describes a small hidden cave entrance the PCs will just have time to barely squeeze into before the search party arrives. The GM then describes the noises of the search team exploring the area near the cave, bits of dialog and commentary made by the searchers, and other details to build suspense. Then, roll the check! Without *Search* as a primary skill, the party should be safe. The GM then describes the leader of the search party ordering some of the team to stand watch on higher ground while the rest continue the search downstream.

Worse than before? Not really! The GM has forced the PCs to stay under cover. The guards are on higher ground which means they'll have a +1 on perception checks and attacks. The PCs would have to leave the narrow opening one at a time. The PCs really have no hope of leaving the way they came in. It's tactical suicide! That leaves no other option than to look around on the inside for another way out. And if the river is the lowest point, and the tunnel goes uphill, how did the water get inside the entrance?

An inspection of the area shows this to be an old drainage tunnel. Guess where it leads. Well, into the fortress, and most of the guards are now outside. At this point, chapter 5 (*The Dark Moment*) ends and chapter 6 (*Resolution*) begins. This scenario is especially good because the PCs will notice that if they didn't "fail" in the initial attempt, they never would have found the drainage tunnel. Did the gods help them by making that roll fail? It's almost like the GM designed it that way, but everyone saw the rolls! No hand of god came down, no fantastic NPCs, and it all looks fairly logical, like a stroke of good luck.

It can be difficult to come up with plans like this at a moment's notice, and you may need to send some mild hints and guidance. Practice, and you can pull this off flawlessly. You may have to describe the guards in extra detail, how careful they are, weapons at the ready, remind the player's about the narrow opening, and then tell them that the back of the cave just fades off into darkness. They'll take the hint fast!

It's leading, but only a little bit! *Shh!*

Example 2 – The Fortress (alternate)

In this alternate situation, the PCs have a plan to use *Drama & Deception* skills as well as a planned ambush of the search party. If the ambush is done right, you can quickly swap uniforms and hide the bodies just before reinforcements arrive. "Quick they went that way! They're getting away! We'll head North and comes back around and try to push them back into you. We'll hit 'em from both sides! Go!" And the first *Drama & Deception* roll is done to see if you can act the lie convincingly. They'll oppose with *Sense Motive*.

Now the party heads back North as promised, but moves onto the fortress and describes the ambush to the guard as if they were the victims instead of the perpetrators! The next round of checks! On success they can proceed to the infirmary and get patched up!

The PCs may need *Etiquette + Heraldry & Insignias* to follow the right forms of address and make the right salutes to the right people. In this case, make the DL a bit on the low side and on a failure, just describe some confusion and let them make up a recovery lie. This check is less about challenges than making it *seem* challenging and making the skills useful.

So what was the bone? Maybe you missed it. There were two. In order to ambush a search party, you would have to roll really high on *Concealment* checks. The way out of that is to assume the search party is distracted by talking and give them a -1 die modifier to spot the party. It's easily missed and gives the PCs the edge. Later, we used *Drama & Deception*. This skill is opposed by *Sense Motive* and we can pretend its not a primary skill for the guards.

Again, it doesn't look like you are changing rolls or cheating. You are just intentionally and secretly shifting the odds. Meanwhile, you are doing it response to the PCs plan, so it ends up looking like the *plan* saved the day and not the hidden fudge. If the PCs didn't have a plan, it would make things much harder to fudge. But a carefully laid out and very risky plan, with plenty of danger and suspense, is exactly what we want to encourage and why we threw that particular bone! Sometimes we call this *The Rule of Cool* and just decide that it succeeded because its going to be fun. Don't even roll!

Example 3 – The Long Forgotten

The PCs have an artifact of some kind and don't know how to operate it. Maybe it requires the gem someone hid on their person in chapter 1 and they forgot about it. This is excellent foreshadowing! A clue in chapter 1 that isn't used until chapter 4 or 5! It was so long ago that no one remembers!

Don't be in a rush to tell them. However, if another thief in the next town were to attempt to steal from the them the same way as the "pickpocket" that hid the gem on them earlier did, then this will be a great reminder about what happened and they'll remember the gem from last time. And if they don't remember immediately, they'll likely check to see if anything was missing and you can read off everything they have. When they hear you talk about the gemstone, someone will ask if there is place on the weapon where the gemstone fits!

Here the GM sets up what looks like another action scene, but it's actually just throwing a bone! A reminder of what they have to get the gears turning! Throwing a bone should ideally make things seem worse when you are secretly helping, or at least keep the bone secret if you can't make things look worse overall.

Never tell a player when you throw them a bone! Keep that a secret and your players will always have fun with your really challenging plots! "How did you know we'd figure that out?" Your plots stay credible, the PCs win, everybody is happy, and you didn't *let* them win, you just changed the challenges they eventually faced, but you can do that!

11.3.4 The Rule Of Cool

The Rule Of Cool states that whoever's idea is the coolest is the one you go with. Sometimes the players come up with a solution that is way cooler that what the author of the scene expected. Maybe a player has an idea for an NPCs motives that is better than yours. Go with the cool idea! Pretend that idea was the original one, and grant some XP for figuring it out! Everybody wins! *Virtually Real is not a zero sum game!*

So, the players want to swing from a rope designed to hold a 50lb chandelier. It's breaking point is probably 4 times that, or maybe 200lbs. The fighter weighs close to 200lbs plus 100lbs of armor and other gear, and swinging puts momentum on that to multiply the force. It's likely going to break! If the halfling rogue wants to try it. That's probably going to work! The Strength Feats chart has a number of DLs of various tasks, and the breaking point of a half-inch help rope is on the table. You can compare the weight equivalence of this amount of force to find out how much weight will make the rope snap. It's your job as the GM to be familiar with where this information is found and be wise in it's use to adjudicate situations.

First, you decide if it can be attempted. Then decide what skill or skills are needed. Maybe they have to jump off the balconey and somersault to the rope (Acrobatics check) and then grab the rope at just the right moment (+1 crit), then swing forward to the other side, let go of the rope and attack from the air as a sort of charge bonus, catching the enemy by surprise.

So, what speed are they at for the charge bonus? Because you are jumping off the rope and not springing from a solid surface, your jump doesn't tell you anything about your speed. Worse, the speed depends on what part of the arc you are at! Ready for the physics equations to figure this out? Nope. Not me! This is when you add your SPD level and SPD die modifier to the charge rather than figuring out actual speed!

It's also the GMs job to know when to *not* use this information. That's the *wise* part. If you think this is just a bad idea, you let them know that their character doesn't think the rope is going to hold that weight but they are welcome to try. Hopefully, you can steer them toward the action you intended. If you think this is a *cool* idea, maybe a good idea you just never thought of, or the party just wants to do it anyway, then they get a roll, with advantage if an intimacy might apply! This whole thing can be done in a single non-combat action. In this case, *Acrobatics* will cover the whole thing, kinda complicated, so DL 10. If you end up needing more skills for something the players come up with, just make the non-combat action a Shared Effort check of the two most important skills. The precise timing is sort of a side difficulty. If the timing goes wrong, it doesn't change how well we do, it just causes an instant fail! So one instance of precise timing is +1 critical. Chance of the rope breaking? Does it matter if you miss a carefully timed action or if the rope breaks? The result is the same, so just add "the rope might break" as a disadvantage.

So, if I had asked you the chance of jumping off a balcony, somersaulting to a chandelier rope that only holds 50lbs, catch the rope in mid-air, swinging across the room on the rope, then expertly jumping to an attack position where you had enough balance and control to get a bonus on the attack instead of struggling to not break an ankle? What's the chances? A realist says it's not gonna happen. The rule of cool says we have to let them try to be heroic and let the dice decide. A "close enough" check says that we succeed, but not good enough to attack because we are still getting our balance back, but its better than falling and breaking something. Estimate a series of 3 actions at 30% chance each, you would only have a 2.7% chance to make that! What about our single roll of Acrobatics, DL 10, according to the rule of cool? If our Acrobatics was a secondary skill, with average Agility, we have [1]+2, a trained acrobat is [2]+3. The average guy has to roll an 8 on 1 die. This is a 2.7% chance because we need a brilliant success! However, it just takes the right passion to get advantage on this driving us to 5%. This is how we keep individuality. Not everyone can make this.

The trained acrobat that would likely try this needs to shine at it. Industry wisdom says we want about a 60-65% chance here. Remember, we aren't talking world-class Olympic gymnast in a professional competition in controlled circumstances. This is an average person that did gymnastics in high school and is now doing it in a life an death situation, so 65% success is pretty generous. With a +3 on 2 dice, they

need a 7, or 32%, close! With advantage for some reason, we are looking at 69%! The +1 critical and 1 disadvantage, means the untrained guy has a 55% chance to critically fail and fall and break his leg, and less than 1% chance to get the attack bonus. Advantage keeps crit chances basically the same but we go from less than 1% success to 5% success! The acrobat is looking at a 20% chance of critical failure, 19.5% with advantage.

Want to make sure they succeed? Throw them a bone! DM: "Since there are two precise timing moments, that's +2 critical, but add a die of advantage for every level of Reflexes since you just need to grab it at the right time". This makes sense that a character with high reflexes should be better at this, but average reflexes are assumed in the skill check! Since an average character has +1 or +2 Reflexes, they are now getting levels of advantage to a roll for free! The higher reflexes were already giving an advantage because they have a smaller time for a non-combat action, and will act sooner at the end! Two levels of advantage on top of the possible 1 die advantage (3 total) turns the chances of a critical fail to only 1.5%, with 96% chance to a DL10. Yes, I hate to say it, but the game is designed so that it's easy for the GM to rig the system! If making this roll is going to be really exciting and cool and *bad-ass,* then you help the player find reasons to pull it off. And you can easily make it sound like the most impossible stunt in the world! It sure sounded bad! Somehow a regular person getting a 2.7% chance to succeed with a 50% chance to fall to his death, sounded realistic. We turned that into 96% success and the player feels like a true hero when he makes it because of his amazing reflexes! Even with the +7 critical, 3 levels of advantage mean you can make that 10+ about 65% of the time. There is that 65% again!

Rule of cool says to not only let the players try all the cool stuff they want, but throw them a bone to help make it happen. And when you do it, throw out modifiers that would really hurt the game or would require too many equations to calculate, like that rope. I think the rules do a great job of simulating what happens, but it runs the simulations you to tell it to run. Do you want gritty or heroic? How generous are you with those modifiers?

Story Types

There are a couple more-or-less "standard" modifications to the basic plot formula. These variations result in different story "types".

11.4.1 The Standard Story

The majority of stories are "standard stories", usually at least 50%. These stories use the standard 3 Act structure with 2 chapters in Acts 1 and 3 and 2-4 in chapters in Act 2. Each chapter has 6-8 scenes. Maybe 50% of the story is in Act 2.

In this, you want to know your themes and symbolisms, the most important scenes, and generally what is going to happen within each Act. Now, start with chapter 1. Know where you are going, but don't design more than a chapter at a time in any detail. Don't write chapter 2 until the players get most of the way through chapter 1!

11.4.2 The Mini-Story

The "mini" can be completed in 1-3 sessions maximum, The usual 3 Act structure applies, but each Act is just 1 Chapter long. The usual awards that happen at the end of the chapter now happen only 3 times in the story rather than 6. The usual 6-8 scenes per Chapter are now per Act, with Act 2 being the longest. You will likely write all of Act 1 at once.

This means your "Hook" may only be 1-2 scenes, and your "Catalyst" may only be 3 or 4. The "Turning Point" and "Midpoint" might be 4-6 scenes each. The "Dark Moment" and the "Resolution" only need 2-3 scenes each. The exact numbers will vary but you are basically cutting down the number of scenes by 3 and telling a much shorter story.

GMs planning on a long campaign will usually make the first story a "mini" to get all the characters introduced to each other and get feedback about the direction of the campaign before committing to a longer story. A mini-story can take the place of a "short chapter" in a campaign's "meta-

plot", described in the next chapter.

11.4.3 The One-Shot

The one-shot is usually just a single session. It may not have much of a story line, especially since many one-shots don't happen within the overall campaign. GMs use one-shots for testing rules, practice, trying out new ideas, or just allowing the characters to practice using special abilities and getting a feel for their character. Death is always rewound at no cost during these sessions and any other long-term damages. XP is usually awarded and kept. One-shots can be a great time-fill if a player can't make it to the session and the upcoming session is important enough to require everyone present. Those that showed up are awarded with the experience earned and play will continue back in the campaign where everyone left it at the next session.

11.4.4 The Epic Story

The "epic story" is a longer story in a campaign. The epic has additional chapters, usually 8-12. Often, the midpoint and second turning-point are completely separate chapters. Epic stories generally have a lot more going on with sub-plots to where sub-plots may form entire chapters.

For example, chapter 3 may be the "Turning Point" of plot A and also a "Catalyst" of sub-plot B. Some chapters will be the turning point of one plot line and the midpoint of another, and so on. The GM will need extra work to really mix the plot lines together and keep things flowing properly. And if it sounds confusing, it's because it is. If you confuse yourself writing it, your players will be totally lost and not having any fun. You really have to do your homework. Remember to *conflict* the players, not *confuse* them!

Epic stories are long but they are not campaigns. The epic story will always have one plot that is recognizably the "main" plot, with the others subordinate. Campaigns will generally finish one story's plot before starting another and will be composed of at least three separate stories, usually much more. Epic stories are for when the players (and the GM) are ready to handle multiple plots going in different directions, a possible cacophony of information, and a story who's longevity may feel like a war of attrition! These can really last, and require that everyone is willing to make a long-term commitment.

A campaign should should not use more than one epic story or the player's will be overwhelmed. Do not make the first story an epic story. This can make the players feel trapped by suddenly putting them in a longer investment than they were prepared to make. Epic stories will always have a common theme among its subplots.