

The 3 Basics of Adventure Design

Any roleplaying adventure has three basic elements: characters, setting, and plot. In a properly designed adventure, each will be dependent upon the other; take away or alter any one and the other two are somehow diminished.

Here, we take a look at the techniques used to develop character, setting, and plot, and offers suggestions for throwing in twists that even the most experienced roleplayer will not expect.

CHARACTERS

A common fault of early roleplaying games was that they offered “cookie cutter” opponents — characters who were capital-E evil without any real rationalization or cause, and who all reacted pretty much the same to the player characters’ actions. Roleplaying has come a long way since the “all orcs are bad guys” days, but there are still some important points to keep in mind when designing a cast of characters for a roleplaying scenario.

Cookie cutter opponents still have their place in roleplaying. They’re useful as canon fodder and in crowd scenes. When a character is only in the adventure to exchange bullets or sword swings with the player characters or to react with a scream when the monster appears and then get devoured, you don’t want to waste time agonizing over his or her motivations or background. All the game master will need is that character’s statistics and the most basic physical description.

Characters who take the leading role in an adventure, however, (and those who have a major supporting role) need more work. They need a history, some goals, plausible motivations, some defining personality traits, and a distinctive appearance. Ideally, all of these elements will be interrelated.

The place to start is, of course, with the character’s goals, since these will be dictated by the adventure itself. In a horror scenario, for example, the thrust of the adventure might involve preventing a series of monsters from killing and maiming an innocent populace. The main opponent might thus be the mad scientist who is unleashing his latest mutant monstrosity upon the world. A fantasy adventure might also revolve around holding back some fantastic creature or awakened evil. In this case, the main opponent might be the monster itself — for example, a dragon that has suddenly awakened and is setting fire to the countryside. In a cyberpunk setting, the emphasis is on dealing with technology. The main opponent might be an android who has gone rogue.

So far, so good. The goal of the adventure has been set: capture the mutant; defeat the dragon; neutralize the rogue tech. The next step is to work on why the opponent is undertaking his or her chosen course of action. In other words, what is motivating the bad guy? This is where the character’s history comes in.

The history doesn’t need to be an entire life story — just the highlights. What specific things happened in that character’s past (either distant past or just yesterday) to make that character the way he or she is today? The mad scientist, for example, might be driven by the tragic loss of his wife to cancer twenty years ago, and might be creating horrid mutations in a misguided effort to find a cure for that disease. The dragon may have awakened yesterday to find her eggs stolen, and might be taking revenge upon the wrong folk. The android might have achieved true sentience through an illegal software modification, and wants to pass this boon along to others of her kind; she is killing those who stand in the way of this altruistic act.

The motivations of the main opponent are typically what defines the true solution to the problem posed in the adventure. They can offer a more subtle roleplaying experience. Instead of

merely waging a war of attrition against the problem (going toe-to-toe with the monster until either the player characters or monster at last die) the player characters can work to uncover the opponent's motivation and neutralize it using other means. The characters instead resort to investigation, deal making, and setting up complex counter-plots behind the scenes, rather than simple (and often boring) monster bashing and die rolling.

With the background and motivation of the character defined, it's time to add the trimmings: the personality quirks and distinctive touches that crystallize the character's appearance. Because these characters are designed for roleplaying, ideally the personality traits should be those that a game master can act out in some way, typically through dialogue or simple mannerisms. These might include a distinctive laugh, a peculiar way of phrasing things, an accent, an oft-repeated hand gesture, slang, or an unusual facial expression or tic.

As for the physical trait, it should be something that can be described quickly and referred to often. Some examples: a mad scientist's bloodstained lab coat and tousled hair; a dragon's glittering scales and sulfuric breath; an android's glowing cybereye or plastic-textured skin. The designer need include no more than two to three such details, as long as they are evocative and memorable. Most importantly, they must be relevant to the character being described, in the light of his or her background and goals.

Setting & Atmosphere

One important consideration for the designer is the overall tone of the adventure. Will it be a humorous adventure, played only for laughs and with no real danger? Or an adventure that is dark and horrific, with unrelenting danger and a sense of impending doom? Most adventures fall somewhere in between, with a few genuinely frightening situations, leavened by moments of humor (sometimes gallows humor).

Usually the tone of an adventure will be determined by the gaming system that it is designed for. A light-hearted adventure for *Toon*, for example, will be very different from the angst-ridden scenarios found in *Vampire*. A fantasy campaign demands a richly textured landscape and creates a sense of wonder by introducing magic, while a space exploration game emphasizes a frontier world of high-tech devices and alien landscapes and cultures.

Whether an adventure is being designed for professional publication or merely for use within your own roleplaying group, the language used to describe the setting is an important detail. In a horror adventure, for example, the language should be gothic and overwrought. In a high fantasy adventure, it should be flowery — almost poetic — and full of mythic sounding place names. In a science fiction scenario, it should be precise and filled with technical terms and acronyms.

One way to get a handle on the language is to read fiction from this genre. Or, if you're writing an adventure set in a specific real-world historical period, read newspapers or books from the era, or watch films from the decade. Whenever there is a pause to describe a scene, look closely at the words or images that were chosen and at the way in which detail is presented, both in terms of what is emphasized and the order in which it is revealed. Read enough of the stuff, and you'll be able to capture the same tone in your adventures.

In some roleplaying adventures, setting is everything. In other adventures, it is merely window dressing; one of many props. If the setting is critical to the plot and moves it along (if the goal of the adventure involves repairing a disabled space ship before the life support systems shut down, for example) there should be lots of descriptive detail. The setting should intrude upon every scene. If the setting is a mere backdrop, however, (a modern day adventure in which

immortals are trying to behead one another) the emphasis should instead be on the characters, rather than on the landscape they are moving through.

In either case, be sure to remember to include as many of the senses as possible. Tell the players not only what the setting looks like, but also how it smells, sounds, and what it feels like, even if the latter is just a mention of a cold wind on the back of a character's neck.

When writing fiction, there are two basic techniques used to describe the setting. The first involves focusing on a specific detail, then pulling back to reveal the entire scene. Imagine a camera focusing in close-up on a bloody knife, then pulling back to reveal the rumpled bed in which the murder was done, and finally the body in one corner of the room. This is most effectively used in horror, where the object is to shock the characters with a specific, gruesome detail, then fill in the rest of the scene.

The second technique presents a panoramic view first, then zooms in on a specific detail. It would start, for example, with a sweeping overview of the battleground in which two armies are locked in violent struggle, then gradually zoom in on the determined prince holding the battle standard and the emblem that it bears.

Either technique can be used when describing setting in a roleplaying adventure, but there is an additional consideration to be kept in mind. Often a game master will want to hide a specific clue from the players, in order to make them work at solving the puzzle that lies behind the adventure. One way to do this is by including the detail in the description, but concealing it behind lots of "chaff" or surplus detail. When doing this, one trick to remember is that players typically remember the latter part of the description most clearly. In other words, the last object mentioned will often seem the most significant in their minds. The important detail, therefore, should be buried somewhere in the middle of a setting description.

The second way to hide a clue is to simply leave the detail out — but to provide, when describing the scene, a descriptive thread that the players can pick up. For example, a description of a room in which a murder was committed might include a mention of the fact that it is messy — the counters are dusty, empty boxes lie on the floor, and dirty dishes are piled in the sink. The important clue might be that one of the boxes bears a key piece of evidence: the name of a corporation involved in events leading up to the crime.

Plot Twists

Plotting out a roleplaying adventure is much like plotting out a novel or short story. There is a "hook" that pulls the player into the adventure, followed by a series of encounters in which the characters are likely to triumph (or at least have an even of surviving). The biggest and best encounter (the story climax) is saved for last, and is designed to be tough enough that the players' wits and roleplaying abilities are what tips the balance — that way, it isn't just die rolling that saves the day. The adventure then ends with a section that tells the game master how to wind the action down, how to hand out awards, and how to deal with any failures, should the player character not succeed in the goals of the adventure.

The best adventures contain a surprise or plot twist of some sort that the player characters typically uncover at the midpoint of the adventure. Tried and true plot twists include: a double-cross by the characters' employer; a magical device that turns out to be cursed; a "kidnap victim," who either doesn't want to be rescued or who staged his or her abduction; a "treasure" map that leads only to danger or an empty hole; and "monsters" who are not really the bad guys — just misunderstood.

Because these twists have been used repeatedly, players have come to expect them. They are no longer the surprises they once were. And because they are anticipated by the players, the designer who uses them needs to put a “twist upon the twist.” Some examples:

- The employer seems to be double-crossing the characters, but in fact is the good guy, and is being framed or manipulated (magically or by plain old-fashioned threats) by the real enemy behind the scenes.
- The magical device has a simple curse that is easily discovered and dealt with. But once this curse is removed, an even greater curse is invoked (or a bound creature is released).
- The “victim” did indeed stage the kidnapping, but now wants to be rescued, since things have taken a turn for the worse. Perhaps the kidnappers double-crossed the abductee or had plans of their own, or the prospective spouse turned out to have a hidden, darker side.
- The map does indeed lead to treasure but it’s just the first leg of the journey. The second leg can only be uncovered by careful investigation at the site of the “vanished” treasure.
- The monsters, once befriended, introduce a hidden danger: a fatal virus that they unwittingly pass on to their human allies.

The best type of twist is one that changes the entire course of an adventure. The characters set out to accomplish one simple task and wind up doing something else altogether. Other adventures have multiple twists a layers that the characters peel one by one, gradually revealing the truth. Here’s an example:

The player characters are asked to smuggle some black-market technology across a border — a simple tactical adventure. Twist number one is that their mission was deliberately set up to fail (the classic employer double-cross, which the players will already be expecting).

As a result, the characters wind up being captured. Hauled in by the authorities, they are immediately hit by twist number two: a murder took place during the botched smuggling attempt, and the characters are believed to be responsible. Blamed for a murder they didn’t commit, the players (who presumably escape) must become investigators to find out who was murdered and why.

In the middle of their investigation, they are surprised by twist number three: the smuggled tech was laced with a fatal virus that has infected the characters. Obviously their double-crossing employer wanted to ensure their silence.

The adventure now turns into a quest for vengeance with a time limit. But when the characters at last track their employer down, they are stopped cold by twist number four: the employer is already dead. The adventure once more turns investigative, as they characters uncover the fact that the virus was introduced by a business partner who wanted to double-cross and eliminate this individual.

When the characters track down the partner, it turns out that there is a cure but that the only person able to provide it is a scientist who was murdered during the botched smuggling attempt. The adventure seems to have come to a dead end, but twist number five revives it: the scientist is still alive. Knowing that he was to be murdered during the botched smuggling attempt, he arranged for a double to take his place and skipped town.

Twist number six is that the scientist is actually an android... And so on.

Ideally, characters, setting, and plot will come together in an adventure in a unified whole. The designer needs to be thinking about all three concurrently, and asking a number of questions as the scenario is developed: Is the setting a logical and appropriate backdrop for the plot? Are the characters natural extensions of their world @ people whom it would seem reasonable to encounter there? Is the plot driven by strong and plausible character motivations?

If the answers to these questions are all yes, the game designer is well on his or her way to creating a richly detailed and memorable adventure — one that will keep player complaints about logic and internal consistency to a minimum.

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