

Instant GM

A Bag of Tricks



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Edited by Wayne Tonjes

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Introduction

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

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

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

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



1) Plot Seeds

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

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

Writing with Plot Seeds

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

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

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

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

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

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

Using Plot Seeds to Prepare for a Game

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

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

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

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

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

Every GM must find her own level of realism. My rule of thumb is: if it wouldn't get screen time in an

action movie, don't waste game time on it. If your players are the type who after killing the evil wizard, strip his lab of everything of value and go through his laundry looking for loose change, you're going to need to develop your games in greater detail.

GMing with Plot Seeds

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

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

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

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

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

Example Plot Seeds

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

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

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

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

Counter Ops: The heroes are spy catchers. They are defending either a project or a person from covert attack. Sabotage, assassination, and terrorism are common plots to be foiled. Counter Ops adventures are reactive, in that the characters never get to make the first move.

They must track down leads and try to prevent any plots of which they learn. Paranoia runs high in these situations and the heroes might be manipulated into unknowingly helping their enemies. The most efficient way to deal with the situation may be to lay a trap for the assailant.

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

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

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

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