

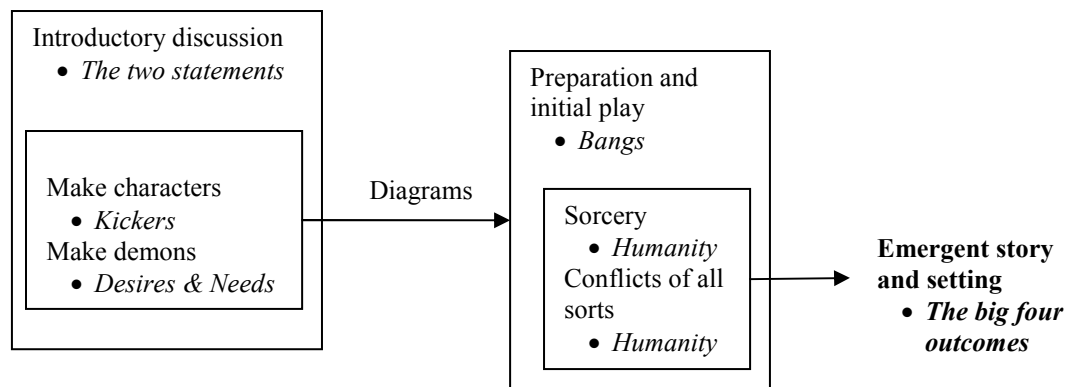
CHAPTER SEVEN

James: “That chart clued me in that while Sorcerer is all about Humanity at the player level, to the *characters* it looks like everything is all about Lore.”

OPENING TEXT

Now it’s about when the sessions are under way. Bangs arrive more organically, the situations and problems have evolved into novel forms, and characters’ value systems have been discovered, expressed, and stressed.

The intended structural result includes rising action, climaxes, and in a word, stories. This chapter is about how that can happen without forcing it to happen, either before play as a whole or session-prep by session-prep. If you follow what I’ve written here, begin with the components for the initial vision, prepare as I’ve described, and play as indicated – what do you *get*?



Sorcerer is character-centric, not setting-centric, which is why setting only begins as an atmospheric and inspirational element. The story emerges through play, but also, as a side-effect, setting becomes more concrete and well-understood too.

And that’s why this book as a text cannot be read as an entertainment, a proxy for play.

IN-TEXT ANNOTATIONS

Pages 114-1119: How I Did It

The setting

My only critique of the setting material I’ve presented here is that it combines material from two separate games. Although thematically it works well, and I did in fact conceive of these and other games at the time within the same distinct thematic zone, the result incorrectly implies that I made all this stuff up in a unified way, prior to play.

I’ll describe the two games, played over most of 1994-1996, to try to show how play *produces* the kind of setting depth that I presented in the original text. I’d already played Sorcerer, which is to say, the rules-notions which did become the eventual rules, a couple-three times. These were the first long-term, dedicated games, played with two different groups, which I think overlapped in real time.

For perspective, the house party scenario in Chapter 4 was also built more-or-less throughout this period, but wasn’t played in a dedicated fashion until I took the game to local game days at game stores, and local cons in 1996-98. My mini-supplement Demon Cops was written much later, in 2000, during the publication process for the core book.

The first game

There were three players. Dan was an aspiring filmmaker whose character, Nancy, was pretty much a direct grab from the character played by Fairuza Balk in the movie *The Craft* (the player had kind of a thing about this actress), with Lore 5, defined as Adept and Mad. Plus her demon was over-the-top horror-awful, with Power 11 or 12, really freaking strong and psycho. It was more or less an occult force with time and space and ... well, it was bad news. Jonathan was his friend and also a student at the kung fu school, whose instructor was a friend of mine (and also a talented artist; the ones with the subway, the bat-rider, and the woman reading the scary book are his). His character was, if I recall correctly, less memorable, but kind of a fun guy. I don't remember his demon at all. Camille was a close female friend of mine, whose character Lupa was the heir to a Latino gangster family, with a tattoo demon named Raimondi, which as it happens, she later got tattooed on her actual ass.

This game taught me how well the fictional-framework categories, like demon Types among other stuff, intertwined with the dice. The bit in the core book about how to deal with simultaneous Parasite and Possessor in the same host came from this one.

The other thing that came out of this game was the dice currency itself showing its stuff. We found out how well the roll-over mechanic worked.

In terms of story, it was very violent. We were all intense fans of both Hong Kong gangster drama and B-martial arts flicks. But it also brought forward a strong dose of surrealism that kind of slipped it to the players unexpectedly. Dan was impressed by my use of contemporary spaces and concepts, for example, having a great deal of a scene occur through the parts of an airport you don't see as a traveler, rendering the familiar utterly unfamiliar without any magical effects at all.

This was the game which produced some of the stuff in Chapter 7, specifically the Cult of the Dark Lady. The big demon pretty much became the villain of the piece. Wow, now I remember, all that sex-transgressive stuff, and the madness stuff ... we actually got sort of philosophically deep among all the spattered body fluids. Some of the story involved revising time, and not merely in the "change the past" way, but revising what time is.

Too much of the plot came from GM-framing and my own plans getting manifested through play. I hadn't quite learned something about that yet, which the next game was to show me. But the plus side was learning how much fun it was to have a character descend well into the worst depths of Humanity loss, yet not be de-protagonized. Nancy had been essentially set up for disaster by Dan's initial character creation choices, and we all learned that in this game, disaster was only the start of when you got to play your character, not the ending.

The second game

The players were Ron (not me, another guy; I was GM), Margie, and Taer, although Taer didn't play past the first couple of sessions. I knew them mainly through the game, comics, and bookstore Novel Ideas, where Ron worked. This was the time I figured out - literally in the prep for session three or four - what this game was capable of. The whole idea of "story prep" which I'd wrestled with for a solid decade blew away like smoke.

The game-fiction was set in my home town area, the Monterey Peninsula in central coastal California, the same that I later messed with fictionally in *Demon Cops* and the *Forbidden Tome* scenario. This version wasn't dressed up anywhere near as those; the only fictional addition was that I changed the names of the towns and exaggerated their traits slightly.

Ron made up a guy who'd just been released from prison, a mild accountant sort. His demon was a family heirloom ring with a fussy personality and Boost Stamina. He liked the idea of this kind of nebbishy guy who could throw a truck if he had to. Margie made up a nun who was dedicated to saving demons' souls, and her current demon was a sort of zesty, mischievous wind-spirit. I got the idea that the nun liked the demons a bit more than she let herself know. Taer made up a private investigator named Grey with a demon pal, a sinister childhood friend named "Jim."

My initial prep was fully based on my own back-story and my notions of clues that the characters might discover about that. Here were the components.

1. A demon based almost entirely on a brilliant concept from ... I believe it was a supplement for Blood Shadows, an RPG from West End Games. The idea was the demon skinned someone, wore its skin, and only figured out that it was a demon when the skin started to slough off, then did it over and over again, attempting entirely sincerely each time to live a normal life as whoever it thought it was at the time. I loved this and ripped it right off. Uhhhh ... poor choice of words. Anyway, I worked out a whole history of whom it had killed and the lives it had lived over the last couple of decades. I believe I named it "Scatch." You can find it described a little abstractly on pp. 69-70.

2. A back-story concerning the death of a sorcerer who'd summoned Scatch, and a young woman who had been a little girl at the time, now grown up. She had a demon buddy too, a nice guy who protected her, and she didn't really realize that she was a sorceress.

Putting these together yielded a bunch of different groups, well, not organizations in the RPG sense of the time, but concentrations of people in the community. One was a horrific child-abuse clique, influenced by my reading lots of stuff by Andrew Vachss. There was another bunch who thought they were occultists. I'd just seen the movie version of Legion ("Exorcist III") on Ron's advice and so as it turned out, included a very fine asylum. Still proud of that one.

All of these things were the flotsam and wreckage left over from the initial badness of the sorcerer, who had a great name which I might remember if I think about it some more, as well as the horrors inflicted by Scatch over the past decade or two.

As you can see, I had a bit too much going on. I didn't respect the Kickers well enough. Although I'd written the rule, none of us really knew what to do with it. Also, Taer didn't write a Kicker and eventually accepted a suggestion that he'd himself found the discarded skin of a former Scatch victim under his patio. But this was definitely him holding out until the GM provided a standard hook; I didn't realize until much later that this was a red flag.

The first couple of sessions were good in their way, for three of us. Margie and Ron really got into the setting and found their feet with these characters, kind of grooving on the bad-yet-gratifying relationships with the demons. Both of their characters were pretty nice people who thought of themselves as empowered to do a little good if they got the chance. As I recall, nearly all the conflicts and action scenes in the first two sessions were canned, meaning, I'd prepped them, shoved the characters into them during play, and ran them with a strong idea of what the scene was for and what they should know. You know ... "good GMing."

Taer politely excused himself from the game. It was a little mysterious at the time because the rest of us had liked his character and the fucked-up friend, "mad bad and dangerous to know." That was my first encounter with a good role-player for whom Sorcerer was simply not the right game.

We continued. The NPC play was working pretty well. The young woman character had clicked well with the remaining players, so they were invested in her situation and concerned that her demon ("Jake") was itself set to go out of control if she didn't figure out a few things. Another NPC named Sally had blossomed from a throwaway character into a lot of fun. The two active player-characters were quite invested in finding out my back-story, and so, in terms of standard "good GMing," everything seemed to be going hunky dory. Story, right? Story role-playing, right? Good story?

Except that when prepping for the fourth session, I suddenly realized something. I had my various NPCs. I had my back-story. I had the locations. And ... there was no point whatsoever in planning a God damned thing. What would they do next? Whatever they announced. What would the demons do next, individually? Whatever I thought/felt was what they'd do, in the moment. What would happen in any given location or scene or combination of characters at the moment? The only possible answer to each question was, whatever would happen when we played it.

My need to prep *events* evaporated. I had the materials. I had a strong sense of current NPC priorities, investment in characters, and simple passion about the topics. The player-characters were solid engines of internal conflict and externally-directed attention to what was happening around them. Wow, I said. I don't need to prep events at all!

I mean, zero. No events. I had the stuff, and all we needed to do was keep playing. Holy fucking shit. I took a deep breath, drew a few circles-and-arrows diagrams to remind myself who was who, and went into the next session without a safety net.

I swear to God you would never believe how much fun the following sessions were, up to and including the climax of our story and of the Kickers. Did the young woman undergo memory-therapy with a hard-nosed hippy counselor ... which resulted in resurrecting the dead sorcerer? Did Scatch actually become a sympathetic character, for a demon anyway? Did Sally give birth to Jim in a horrific re-summoning ritual after Jim was banished, after having killed Grey? Did both sorcerer player-characters utterly transform into bad-asses on the knife-edge between moral judgment and mortal arrogance? Did they go into that asylum, to give us all (the real people) nightmares for years to come? Yes, yes, all yes.

I had no idea it was going to get that good. All I had to do was respect the back-story and the events to date, play my characters, and trust my own aesthetic judgments about where/when to open and close scenes. The more I cared about what was going on right then, and the less I cared about how it was going to turn out, the better it got. Ron and Margie felt as if their characters were, for the first time ever, freed from any kind of expectation or pre-established role they must fit into to be "played right," and instead, played those two characters in their own right, who would take whatever was thrown at them and damned well say and do whatever they would. It was exhilarating, scary, and ultimately liberating.

Page 114: Convocation

The Convocation idea is simply fucking stupid. It looks great on paper, but every time I tried it in play, it fell flat. I can unequivocally advise you not to do it.

Page 122: The really big questions

It's nice to see that I was trying to write about real religions all the way back then, but my terminology was naïve. Instead of "Judeo-Christian," I'd now say "Abrahamic."

Page 123: Thematic points

I'm very happy with my phrasing in this section. It is exactly how I wanted to bookend the thematic questions I raised in Chapter 1.

To realize this same kind of bookending through play, and speaking to the GM especially, you must respect a given player-character's full Kicker. That means playing it past whatever climax occurred in play, and well into its repercussions, including dealing with any emergent conflicts as well. Don't drop it at the first sign of a conclusion: "Oh, hey, you found the guy who killed your dad, I guess that's done." If the plot has occurred as organically as I've been trying to describe here, then it is quite unlikely that no one else has any opinion about the events, or that the character can simply go back to his or her previous life untouched.

The best prep question for you after a particularly definitive or dramatic conclusive moment for a character (relative to his or her Kicker) is, "Well, now what?" Meaning, not what new crisis occurs, but rather, given all that's happened, what does the character do now? Even asking for a look at the character's typical day will often generate a powerful response for everyone at the table.

Page 124: new section, Some techniques

More thoughts about Bangs ... specifically, when and how to shine a spotlight on all the player-characters. Sorcerer games tend to include multiple characters in separate locations, often rapidly getting in trouble. The way to do this is actually start all the scenes, then jump-cut across them regularly, perhaps fifteen to twenty minutes per unit in my experience. When a character gets right to the point of going to the dice,

“freeze” him or her and keep going until everyone else is at such a point too. Then run the conflicts as one great big one – it works great.

Consider the spectrum from completely disconnected protagonists, not even indirectly, to an already-established team of protagonists, already fired-up about their next move. Neither extreme is especially common in playing Sorcerer given the character creation method. Most common is a set of protagonists who do not know one another but whose situations overlap indirectly, and for whom any action tends to have secondary or tertiary effects on the others. When you’re the GM in some variant of this situation, the best thing to do is to include the effects of one character’s actions as peripheral features in a later scene about another character, whenever the locations of the scenes permit. If and only if you don’t force it, you’ll find that it’s productive simply to run two of the current protagonists’ current actions right into one another, going past one another at the same street corner, for instance.

Spotting the right time for such reminders that the characters are indeed sharing the same location may sound hard or arbitrary, but in later play, it becomes much easier: you’re dealing with player-generated Bangs, significantly altered character diagrams, and more focused and desperate actions on the part of your own NPCs. So moments when two or more player-characters would experience maximum chaos or adversity by being in one another’s presence are more likely to emerge right there in play, with no planning needed.

If I’m not making myself clear, then here it is: never make decisions in play which take into account how you want a scene or situation to result. Make them in order to make scenes and situations more grounded in what’s gone before and more rich in potential for conflict. You’ll get nowhere trying to make a Sorcerer player-character do anything specific.

Page 125: A narrative experiment

I still want to do this with Sorcerer, although the technique has now found a home in Vincent Baker’s *In a Wicked Age* and in my solo game, *Relic*.

Page 126: A scary idea

This “play the demons” notion is the first tweak people bring to the game. In practice, it turns out to be ass. Don’t do this one either.

CLOSING TEXT

Looking back over the book, I find there’s an element which hasn’t received much attention over the years: the role of being funny. Sorcerer doesn’t immediately appear to be a funny game, and yet, there’s a certain range of humor in its inspirational sources, and as I’ve found, in play. I’m beginning to think of it as an intermittent yet significant feature.

It’s not necessarily nice humor. Looking through some of my inspirations, it’s like the mordant Merlin’s Laugh from Robertson Davies’ *World of Wonders*, or even outright grotesque as in S. Clay Wilson’s comics and in John Callahan’s cartoons. Or satirical, and unafraid of excess, like Voltaire’s *Candide*, films directed by Pedro Almodóvar, short stories by John Collier, and the standup routines of Bill Hicks. Most positively, it’s generous and open, especially when acknowledging the utterly absurd quality of life and the cosmos, as with Fafhrd’s laughter in Fritz Leiber’s story *Adept’s Gambit*. But it spares no one, especially not oneself.

So my advice is to indulge whatever bizarreness, absurdity, or sarcasm manifests itself during play. Let it emerge, laugh if you feel like it, and keep on going.

I’ll reference the tattoo-artist game one more time: in that game, the mood among the characters and infusing most of the scenes was composed of desperation and personal sadness, with a little bit of hope and artistry here and there. But I don’t think it would have worked unless some mad moments of laughing out loud hadn’t found their way in as well. In one scene, the character was dealing with two demons. The one Bound to her was disgruntled and rebellious, threatening to cause all manner of trouble; the other was

seeking to be Bound to her in a somewhat threatening way. The exasperated sorceress whipped up a one-shot Contain simply to shut the latter up for a moment or two, choosing to use the handy toaster-oven in her flat. So we had this demon, who happened to be a roughneck-type Passer, a big burly guy, suddenly folded and spindled and flattened, then neatly snapped up like a weird little package into the toaster-oven's interior.

There was the sorceress explaining to her disgruntled demon that no, she had not been "seeing" this other demon on the sly, and if it did not listen, it could go right into that oven too, and meanwhile the other demon, who was a considerably violent presence in the game, made sputtering outraged noises from inside the toaster-oven. We all knew the character was in genuine danger. We also squealed and guffawed, reinforcing rather than defusing the intensity of rolling the dice to see whether either demon's worst urges could be quelled.

I get more from playing Sorcerer than from a number of horror-themed role-playing games published over the years. But it's not because Sorcerer is more gory or uses more black ink. It's because the games I'm thinking of were, in the words of a friend of mine, "dying of sincerity," whereas here, gallows humor, existential humor, and above all defiant humor are a big part of the material. The sorcerer character takes on the universe, whether personalized by a God or not. To do that, or to author such a character with integrity, requires either insanity or the ability to laugh at the level I'm talking about.

I don't know if you, the reader, can tap into this. I hope so, and I hope you can tell me about your experiences in playing the game some day.