

## Setting and emergent stories

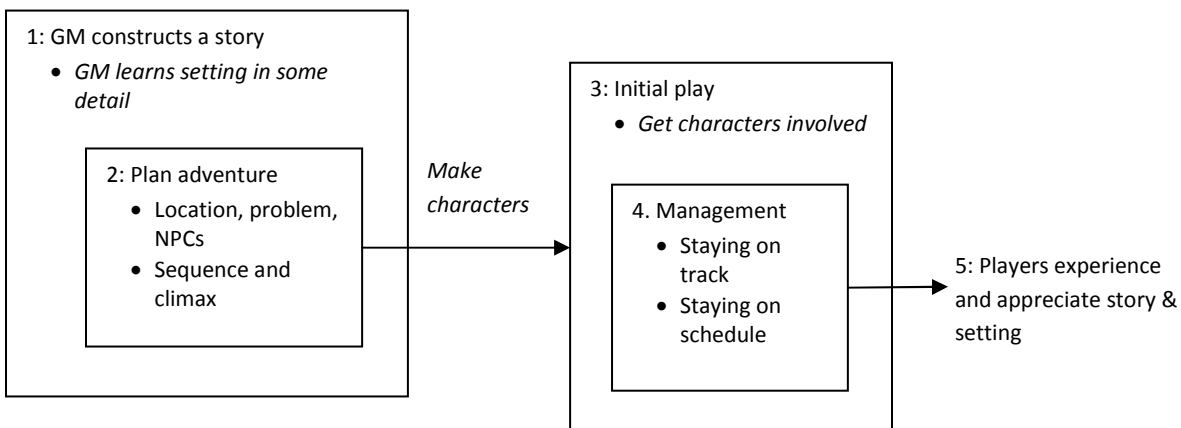
By Ron Edwards, October 2011

This essay is really about setting but I found that I had to explain the story part first.

### Part I: The default, “Story Before”

During GenCon 2011, I often began my Sorcerer pitch with the phrase, “In this game, you cannot prep plot.” The reactions were illustrative: usually, fascinated confusion, with the person asking how that could ever, ever be possible. They were also exactly what I expected.

My point is that our gamer subcultural default expectation for role-playing is that plot is a prepped function. I’m intimately familiar with that expectation, so I’ve tried to illustrate how it’s done with a diagram. This is what I did for a very long time, and it’s what I see explained or at least deeply implied by many RPG texts.



My jargon calls this Story Before, meaning the basic course of events is pre-conceived and treated as something to be implemented. For example:

- They’ll individually be harassed or attacked by some person or institution, then after that, they’ll band together in opposition to that person or power.
- They’ll be hired as a group to perform some task, then realize that the task is villainous, whereupon the employer tries to do away with them, and they oppose him or it.
- They’ll care for a person in trouble, then the person gains power and becomes a source of trouble, at which point they have to confront the person in violation of their previous regard for them.

Also, in the interest of the whole essay’s point, I’m specifying here that we’re talking about a game text which includes a detailed setting, in which the various locations, problems, and NPCs (in the first inner box) are easily identifiable or can easily be created once you’ve studied it in some detail. Enjoyment of the setting’s content as such is one of the intended joys and significant features of play.

Setting therefore becomes a one-step removed education and appreciation project. There's a big book about the setting. The GM reads the book. Then, the players enjoy the setting, or rather enjoy the GM's enjoyment of the setting, by using play as a proxy. As one text puts it, the GM is the lens through which the players see the setting. The story is an experiential hook for continuing to look through the lens.

This kind of play is often called setting-heavy, but as I see it, when playing in this fashion, the goal of having the players enjoy the setting as such is actually at considerable risk. It's hard to parse the relationship between (1) the story, first as created, then as played; and (2) the setting both as a source for conflicts ("adventures") and something which might be changed by them. The two things may be positioned orthogonally: in a way, setting is "everything" for such play in the GM's mind, but "nothing" for play in the players'. Perhaps this is what leads to those monstrous textual setting histories in the books, with the only people who read them (or care) being their authors and the GMs.

As I've observed it, setting in Story Before play tends to swing one of two ways: (1) a source for funny hats for the player-characters as the players recapitulate familiar and enjoyable characters that they've played before and will play again; and (2) so interesting to the players that they effectively take no interest in the plot-hooks and problems pitched to them by the GM, preferring instead to remain wholly thespian, at best involved in the planned stories as good-natured grumblers.

I think the core of these problems contains two issues.

1. The player-characters are not actually part of prep, but are rather folded into existing prep. This carries the risk of "not fitting," which has two solutions: (i) grin and bear it, ignoring the inconsistencies and scaling up the coping mechanisms; or (ii) exert tight control over character creation to the extent that the GM is making up their most important features, not the players.

2. Character activity during play is swiftly categorized into two kinds: "with" the story or "against" the story. The GM's job is to make the former most common, whether by dictating or non-negotiably hinting at proper actions to take, or retrofitting actions taken into outcomes that fit after all. The players are therefore "good" if they cooperate with these methods or "bad" or "disruptive" if they don't.

All right, all that said, such play is not *by definition* broken, and some groups, at some times, with some games, have produced some great play experiences, when and if they can solve the basic problem. The solutions in detail are beyond the scope of this essay (which is supposed to be about setting, I promise), but I think they reside in the issue of social and creative honesty.

The Forge jargon for doing this the honest way is "Participationist play," meaning that the players are perfectly aware that the story has been pre-set in its major elements and they are happy to enjoy it at that level, being empowered to enrich thespian aspects of play and to develop contextual or personal subplot opportunities. Some texts which explicitly call for Participationist play include *Call of Cthulhu*, *Pendragon* (especially the short adventure books), *Arrowflight*, and the more recent *Trail of Cthulhu*.

The dishonest way is “Illusionist,” effectively attempting to retain the literally absurd notion that the GM can “control the story” at the same time as the players “make the decisions for their characters.” Here, the GM’s jobs are almost all carried out under the deception that the players have more freedom than they really do. Such play is rife with potential breaking points, many of which arise from the necessary practice of railroading, itself best understood as imposed control over player-characters’ actions’ *outcomes*, sometimes via control over the players’ announcements. The terrible thing is that historically, RPG texts very frequently include detailed instructions to do this, to the extent that a titles list would fill up this page.

OK, that’s all I want to say about that, with my point being that in Story Before play, the eventual goal of enjoying and loving the *setting* is quite distant considering how problematic the issue of *story* is. And to point out that an extensive page count of textual setting does not necessarily mean that setting is important to and useful for play.

## **Part II: Story Now**

I used to call this Narrativism, sometimes still do. “Story Now,” though, is the best descriptive term because plot is treated as an emergent property during play itself. Enjoyment of play lies equally in generating that plot and appreciating it (including its newly-created themes), and techniques toward these ends have blossomed in the past decade.

I should clarify that Story Now play does not merely inject a dose of flexibility or improvisation into Story Before play. It’s a different animal entirely. For example, the classic “play my character vs. play for the story” dichotomy is literally impossible. There simply isn’t any “the” story. The only way to *get* a story is through people playing their characters.

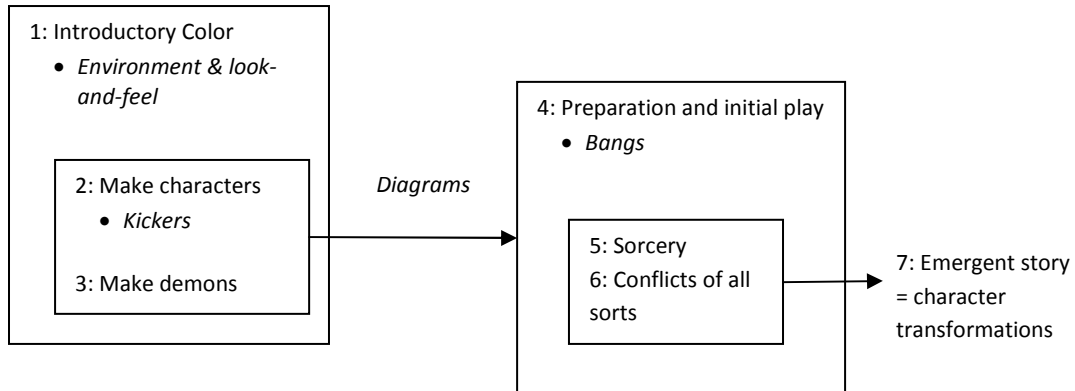
It relies heavily on situational crisis within the fiction, and not only the knowledge among the players that their characters are significantly embedded in it, but their enjoyment of that because the characters’ allegiances and priorities are free to unfold and change during play (“protagonism,” a problematic term unless you understand that it’s prescriptive in this case).

In other words, such play requires multiple starting components which are filled with socially and morally unstable, problematic, and intriguing features. Play – and *only* play – is expected to generate the consequences of such things coming into confrontation with one another and with their own interior fault lines.

And finally we come to the essay’s topic: the emphasis on and use of setting for Story Now play: as a creative element of these unstable situations, as a group tool for buy-in, and as a topic for which the events of play will carry thematic weight.

**1.** However, probably aggravatingly, I will begin with the more familiar model for Story Now play, which focuses on character-centric conflict instead. How this works is pretty simple: the primary pre-play

creative work lies in character creation, with setting elements being utilized or even invented strictly to generate conflicts and issues are exemplified by those characters. “Real” setting, or rather, the development of setting that’s genuinely external to the characters, is an emergent property of playing for a while, and it emerges simultaneously with the emergence of plot from the characters’ actions and experiences. Whether it undergoes any transformation or not is merely a matter of detail for that game, because the non-negotiable focus of attention is the transformation of the characters.



The above diagram includes details from the Sorcerer rules to show how mechanics can help the procedures. Kickers are problematic character events written by each player, each of which by definition disrupts his or her character’s life at the starting moment of play; demons are built-in sources of power imbalance and ethical crisis as well. The crucial *Diagrams* item includes and organizes these and other character sheet elements.

My present point is that initial preparation doesn’t start with setting but rather with an evocation of setting, providing the necessary environment in which to visualize a character, and no more. Therefore setting information is deliberately kept sketchy at the outset, without any points of interest except for how it provides adversity toward the characters, if indeed that occurs at all. And when it does, the setting remains strictly facilitative of the primary conflicts embedded in the characters themselves.

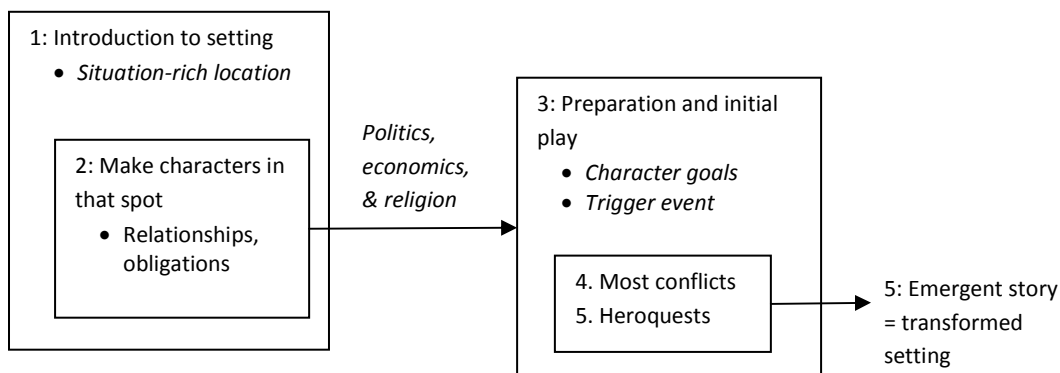
Other games which rely on this model include *Dust Devils*, *Lacuna*, *Primetime Adventures*, *shock:*, *Sign in Stranger*, *Poison’d*, and *Dogs in the Vineyard*; you can re-write the above diagram quite easily with their mechanics instead of the Sorcerer ones. I consider *Over the Edge*, *Zero*, and *The Whispering Vault* to work very well this way too, although their texts are understandably a bit schizophrenic regarding the issue given their publication dates. You can even do it with *Champions* and *Amber*, with some significant system tweaking and a lot of social buy-in toward playing this way.

An important variant is explained in *Sorcerer & Sword*, when you do build specific spots of setting via scenario creation, and the big setting eventually turns into a map and perhaps even a timeline after multi-scenario play. Games which explicitly utilize this technique include *In a Wicked Age ...*, *Legends of Alyria*, and if desired, *The Pool*.

Character-centric Story Now play is consistent with epic literature and myth, classical drama, and adventure fiction of all kinds. This point is best illustrated by the games which include mandated missions in the sense that you rarely play anything else. Examples include InSpectres, Lacuna, 3:16, The Whispering Vault, and Dogs in the Vineyard. However, I think they differ significantly from the classic Story Before missions in that bluntly, the outcomes of the missions don't really matter except insofar as they affect the characters. Playing Dogs isn't about saving towns, it's about what trying to save towns does to people; playing Lacuna isn't about curing or managing mental illnesses, it's about discovering how badly awry a policy to do so has already gone, in oneself. Such games are about adventurers who discover they are not really adventurers but people after all, and adventures which turn out to be crucibles for the visitors' transformations rather than something to be reliably shaped by the visitors' efforts. In this sense, the very inescapability of the missions, as play-procedure, carries a ruthless meaning which is absent from the Story Before version of the concept.

I went into this much detail about this way to play because historically, it was developed first as an explicit alternative to the Story Before methods described earlier. Therefore in early Forge discussions, a perceived dichotomy formed which contrasted Setting with Story Now (Narrativism). Here, I'm firmly calling this dichotomy false and showing that Story Now play can function very well using a setting-centric approach.

2. And now, finally, at last, the diagram for setting-centric Story Now play.



I've used some terms from the game I first really applied this model with, at that time called Hero Wars. The two subsequent iterations of those rules, renamed HeroQuest, may or may not use exactly the same terms, but the same ideas do apply. The main one is obvious: right off the bat, making characters draws directly and consequentially upon the available cultures in the chosen location. In other words, the first thing you do to play is pick a spot on the world map, which provides the options for character creation in addition to the particular political and religious crises hitting flashpoint at that time – as opposed to having a character-type list spanning the whole setting to pick from. Similar features are present throughout the rules. The key transitional information for preparing comes right out of setting information, for instance, and character goals are not necessarily sources of conflict, let alone the central source. Heroquesting mechanics frequently have quantified and specific effects on the location, including ecology and culture.

Enjoying the setting isn't an end-stage outcome, it's a starting and prevailing commitment. Nor is a single person expected to be the doцент for the textual setting; rather, it belongs to everyone for inspiration and use. Play deepens it and provides nuances, and most importantly, changes it.

In terms of content, the RuneQuest supplement *The Haunted Ruins* was way ahead of the curve, itself building on the earlier *Trollpak*. For explicit procedures for this way to prep and play, see *The Rustbelt*, *Venus 2141*, and *Nine Worlds*. The already-mentioned games *Dogs in the Vineyard* and *Legends of Alyria* can be tuned toward this direction with no change in text, and only a slight expansion of one's reading focus. The texts for *The Shadow of Yesterday* and *The Riddle of Steel* are consistent with it, but lack some of the steps and are therefore confusing through omission at least to some readers. *The Mutant Chronicles* completely lacks meaningful text on preparing and conducting play itself, but I am convinced that the sequence I've diagrammed here would work well for it. Other game texts that might benefit from more attention to these techniques include *Everway* and *Castle Falkenstein*.

One concern that crops up a lot for playing this way is how expert people have to be even to get started. Although not everyone must be expert, certainly no one can be ignorant either. But people are understandably wary of game texts with extraordinary page counts concerning setting information.

In my experience, the solution begins with a single person choosing the location, at least when the group is playing the game for the first time. He or she should provide a brief but inspirational handout which summarizes the entire setting, focusing on colorful and thematic points; if the opening text of the game book provides this, a quick photocopy will do. (I've tried to do this for my science fiction RPG handouts, so see those if you are confused by what I mean here.)

After that point, everyone at the table may restrict his or her attention to the exact location that's been chosen. Although the organizing person should provide more detailed handouts or photocopies as an ongoing feature of preparation, everyone else must definitely be oriented and enthusiastic concerning the prevailing thematic crises that are made concrete in setting terms. The good news is that full expertise isn't necessary to achieve this, and in my experience, asking and answering questions about the options for the geographically-limited character creation usually generate sufficient knowledge for the first sessions of play.

This is the framework I'll be using for my instructional goals for this essay, which now appear at last.

### **Part III: How to do it with a confused game text**

I want to focus on several game texts that present explicitly powerful settings which as I see it simply scream out to be utilized as I've described above, but which are also saddled with play-advice that undercuts the potential. Examples include *DeGenesis*, *Kult*, *Earthdawn*, *Wraith: the Oblivion*, *Tribe 8*, *Unknown Armies*, *Promised Sands*, *Center Space*, and *Tsyk*, all of whose provocative, ambitious introductory chapters and thematically ambitious aspects of their content are entirely at odds with their pedestrian, later-placed advice-for-play chapters. Effectively, they begin by promising, even exulting in

Story Now potential, backing it up with genuine and original depth for characters and locations, and then finish with Story Before instructions – and highly derivative ones at that – which cannot possibly deliver on the initial promise.

The origins of this problem are obvious: simply aping the models provided by D&D2 (especially Dragonlance), Shadowrun, and for European games, Der Schwarze Auge, all of which have had a poisonous effect on many potentially awesome setting-heavy games, for European texts in particular.

Among many others, one consistent problem with such texts is being forced to reconcile the deeply community-oriented problems of a given location for play with the inappropriate assumption that player-characters are a team of outsiders who've just arrived from very far away. Since these can't be reconciled, each text repeats a whole circular and unsuccessful mantra about it without managing to deliver meaningful or even engaging instructions.

I will now provide a set of concepts and practices to bring out what seem to me to be these games' best features for setting-centric Story Now play. The idea is to embrace the setting as a genuine, central source of the colorful thematic dilemmas explicit in the games' introductory text, and to resist the retraction and retreat to comparatively tame Story Before which are explicit in the later GM-advice and scenario-preparation text.

### Preparation

1. Choose a location. The group must discuss and become enthusiastic about the setting, and in many cases, the game organizer will have to present a home-grown summary text painting a big and sketchy picture of the whole setting as well as a more detailed look at the location.
2. Make player-characters in it. In doing so, drive this into your brain: *fuck "the adventurer."*
  - Not all types of characters described in the character creation options are OK. They need to be characters who *would* definitely be at that location, not just someone who *could* be there. They have something they ordinarily do there, and are engaged in doing it.
  - All characters, player-characters too, have lives, jobs, families, acquaintances, homes, and everything of that sort. Even if not native to that location, they have equivalents there.
  - Player-characters do not comprise a "team." They are who they are, individually. Each of them carries a few NPCs along, implied by various details, and those NPCs should be identified. It is helpful for at least one, preferably more of them to be small walking soap operas.

### Post-character creation prep

3. Along with the adventurer, *fuck "the adventure."*
  - They aren't going anywhere, as in, filling their backpacks and traipsing somewhere besides their immediate location. We're in this location *because* this is where the action is.
  - Note that sometimes the player-characters wind up in the same culturally-acknowledged "group" and sometimes they don't. Either way is fine.
4. Identify the immediate tensions the player-characters and their associated NPCs provoke or experience.

- Find and make more NPCs relevant to these tensions. Now you should have quite a little army of characters floating around each player-character, and perhaps linking two or more of them.
5. Aggravate the situation with a Trigger event – anything which destabilizes one or more of power, money, status, or resources.
    - Consider everything about that location! Geography, ethnicity, politics, economics, religion, cultural practices, and just keep going with anything and everything related to all that stuff.

#### And now, into play

6. Situation: given the Trigger event, the political becomes ever more personal.
  - Specifics: consider who's where, doing what – effectively, play your NPCs with verve.
7. In play: scene framing means putting characters into the same place to see how they interact – it's all very, very dynamic.
  - Simply utilize screen time for everyone, switching around, using events from scenes as consequence and visual effects for later scenes. Don't try to force characters together for no reason; remember, they don't have to "team up."
  - Don't force or pre-plan conflict; instead, discover conflict by recognizing when escalations and confrontations appear in play.
8. Everything you know about how to do it is wrong.
  - Players will interrupt you, run around to unexpected places and people, stuff your NPCs' plots, and "ruin" things – you must work only with the material of the moment, and never, never think in terms of establishing X so that you can get to Y.
  - And crucially, embrace the fullest and most extreme rules-driven consequences of every single resolved conflict, no matter what they are. Show those consequences and treat them as the material of the moment in the very next scenes, every time.

#### Between sessions

9. Heraclitus in action: in the next session, it won't be the same situation, and they aren't the same characters any more.
  - As you go, go ahead and use the character-changing mechanics that the game probably includes, but also pay attention to the events' impact on social, monetary, political, or other immediate societal problems, and treat that impact as the core content for preparing to play your NPCs in the next session.
  - Consider large-scale, irreversible consequences for the setting: not necessarily every session, and it's easy to forget about them if there's no mechanics involved, but they do develop and they effectively comprise the units of play.
10. Games vary a lot regarding the formal consequences upon a setting, which I'll discuss a bit later. For now, merely keep in mind that your immediate location for play was "made to be broken," and be willing to display the stages of its breaking with every game session. If the game doesn't have any mechanical way to express this, then do it anyway based on what's happened so far.

Because I didn't see a good place to put it, I'll toss in one of the fun details about player-character creation: there is absolutely no need to fulfill "needs," such as making sure that you have enough



fighters or anything else. In fact, given that conflicts in play will necessarily be socially relevant and quite consequential, player-characters with completely ordinary skill-sets or roles in life are just as much fun as anyone else, sometimes more.

#### **Part IV: Example using DeGenesis**

I'd begin by distributing the first nine pages of the DeGenesis Quick-Start PDF (available on-line), probably adding a few comments of mine about the setting concerning its implicit brutal commentary on post-Cold War Europe. Two topics which occur to me are "I got your German Unification *right here*," considering a meteor cuts a horrific scar into the Earth pretty much exactly along the former division line; and "Globalization is good for you, trust us," considering the Africans as a perfect ruthless portrait of today's United States' presence and policies in Europe.

Then I'd pass out the following handout to them. I encourage you to get a preliminary copy of the game in English from Posthuman Studios; I think you can get it as a PDF if you send them an email.

We start simply by picking a location. Then ask:

1. Who's there? Natives and cults thereof, outsiders, Africans, and psychonauts.
2. Ecology and its results: urban vs. countryside, wilderness vs. cleared, movement and travel, and all things economic; also, spore, Burn, and psychonauts.
3. Specify: what are Tribals like? Apocalyptiks? Scrappers?
4. Politics: war vs. peace, which cults are in and which are out, discord vs. alliances, overt vs. covert activity and commerce, necessary compromises.
5. Crisis: immediate and overt, known and looming, on the boil, lurking in potential.

*Example: "Let's play in the Balkhans!"*

#### **WHO'S THERE**

Hellvetiks in the Alps, especially nasty Ashen down below. Balkhan people throughout, mostly Jehammedan (centered in Bucharest) with usual underlying Scrappers and Tribals and Apocalyptiks (especially in Beograd). Scourgers are dramatically present as the invading and occupying military; Neolibyans hold the Bosphorus; Anabaptists and Spitalians glare across the Adriatic basin from Purgare.

#### **ECOLOGY AND ECONOMY**

Incredible local geographic diversity, urban strongholds run by robber-baron lineages called Voivods, and tons of usable mountain and forest areas, creating the perfect insurgent environment. No organized economy exists beyond local, practical value-standards for barter and the Voivods' dubious attempts at local scrip. Spore is scattered throughout most areas and is not routinely torched. It has fully taken over Pest, where Dushani gather. Low-level infested people often still live in their home communities, and the Dushani local name "The Soulful Ones" implies a certain level of tolerance. Also, African spore infestation, the psychovor, has completely overrun former Turkey, the first such major incursion into northern Mediterranean shores. The local population there is surprisingly resilient and technologically savvy compared to the Balkhans.

#### **TRIBALS, APOCALYPTIKS, SCRAPPERS**

Tribals are mostly ordinary farmers and herders, well-established, widespread, and powerful enough to force compromises with Voivods in their cities. Their local ram-based cults overlap strongly with certain brands of Jehammedanism. Scrapppers operate without an economy (either Chronicler or Neolibyan), so they freelance for Voivods in disorganized fashion, mainly seeking weapons. Given a minimal history of Scragging, there's a lot to find, perhaps especially through tentative contact with the Ashen. Apocalyptiks are living opposition to Jehammedan doctrine, but they've found a haven in Beograd and serve well, along with Tribals, in Jehammedan forces against the Scourgers.

## POLITICS

War and more war: Jehammedans lead the resistance against the Scourger invaders, setting the context for everything else.

1. The African situation: Neolibyans would be happy to call it a day and trade from the Bosphorus, but the Balkhans have become the Scourger's Afghanistan, and in a war zone, they call the shots.
2. Balkhan cities are ruled by Voivods, whose iron fists must constantly compromise with Jehammedan leaders, occasionally-uncontrollable Apocalyptiks, and even powerful Tribals. All of these groups are internally unstable as well, based on family feuds and petty politics, although they rally fast against the Scourgers. Also, Jehammedan doctrine is more unstable than it seems, regarding its Aries sub-cult and the more general ram cults among the tribals.
3. Ashens are a real problem, exchanging atrocities with the Tribals of the Carpathians and pestering the Hellvetiks. Certain less hostile interactions have tentatively begun with enterprising Scragppers.

## ACTION

### Immediate

1. Any basic war story: siege, assault, trenches, et cetera, from either European or African side.
2. Constant breakdown of local compromises is a way of life here, ranging from new combinations of strange bedfellows to flare-ups of within-faction war.
3. Active Ashen depredation, overt Dushani incursion and action.

### On the boil

Potential significant Scrapper finds, challenges to Hellvetik neutrality, Scourger vs. Neolibyan priorities, Jehammaden clash with Apocalyptiks, and the Aries-based schism within Jehammedanism, with Tribal implications.

### Looming

More Awakened from the Ashen vaults (the Krajni foreshadow such events), a tipping-point for the Adriatic standoff, the barest hint of a possible Scourger-Ashen accord.

## CHARACTER CREATION

The above discussion will provide multiple jumping-off points for character inspiration.

1. Simple coolness identification.
2. Shared identity with some other player-character, via either official labels or personal ties.
3. Seeing an overt, culturally-supported conflict.
4. Seeing potential for culturally-unexpected, deconstructive conflict (internal or external).
5. Any combination of the above.

Some considerations for player-character creation, in addition to points already raised.

1. The three C's (Culture, Concept, Cult) and psychology:

- A player-character does not have to be a down-the-line stereotypical representative of the culture/cult mainstream for any number of variables.
  - Concept is about characters' upbringing, not necessarily their adult value system.
  - Principles: we need explicit agreement about what these are in procedural terms; note that the experience section uses very carefully chosen and potentially very productive phrasing, which does *not* imply rigid thespianism as the goal for these descriptors.
2. Many of the Cults are supplied as much by conversion as by birth parentage, in many locations. So birth parentage cult or cults is wide open in many cases, with lots of potential for refining a character idea. No need to do anything special with the rules, and let Concept and all three Principles do the lifting. (note my Purgare Apocalyptik character, born to Anabaptists)
  3. Non-canonical culture/cult combinations will arise as possibilities based on location. Treat them ordinarily per the rules.
  4. Family, acquaintances, associates, lovers, authorities, and subordinates, all in context of Cult rank; do it without massive back-story and arrive at several NPCs. If you really don't want to, then nail down a solid social role for the character in the community.

### In our example

So let's say someone gets excited about the Apocalyptiks in Bucharest, no doubt inspired by the illustrations.

- This player begins making up a male leader type who likes the perks gained by allying with a Voivod. (Balkhan: Proud, Peace: Mediator, Apocalyptik: Bonds of Kinship)
- Another player goes for an off-type Scourger deserter gone native, possibly the most dangerous man in town. (African: Hedonistic, Compulsion: Elitist, Apocalyptik: Self-Destructive)
- The third, seeing these, decides upon a Jehammedan who's fought with the Apocalyptiks vs. the Scourgers; could even be related to the first guy. (Balkhan: Vengeful, Peace: Moralistic, Jehammedan: Loyal)

Wow! All manner of explosive going on there, and notice the potential for some serious satellite NPCs:

- The woman in a romantic triangle with the first character and his political ally, the Voivod's chancellor.
- The other family members of the two siblings, probably from an isolated and unusually stable rural area.
- The African character's Burn supplier and best friend.
- The Jehammedan's imam, perhaps too pushy.

Note the snowball effect: if someone had begun by talking about a cool Tribal character concept first, far from the cities, we could be looking at very different ideas from the other players now, perhaps involving Ashen and Awakened. Or obviously, an African-centric game would be entirely different, either all-African or perhaps with a European slave character.

The point is that this level of "campaign definition" is mostly player-driven, most especially the degree of within-group vs. among-group conflict. However, that does not mean that GM input is limited to explicitly player-centric things; the conflicts that arise from character concepts are always linked to other stuff in the setting which catches his or her fancy.

So now I start thinking about prep. Notions that jump out at me include, do Jehammedan and Jehammedan-compatible tribesmen utilize Dushani help against the Scourgers? Does one of the rare successful Scrappers run a spy network through the Apocalyptik whore who desperately loves him, and does he sell information to Scourgers and Jehammedans alike? Either of these provides some underlying consequences and tensions that can inform play which focuses overtly on the concerns of the listed three characters.

I hope that was interesting to read, even if you didn't have the DeGenesis text to clarify all the rules references. I do recommend getting it; the setting is quite exceptional. What I'm hoping you see here is that we could follow the same logic regarding *any* location we chose from the setting, and wind up with an extremely playable, volatile situation, in which every person at the table is fully engaged.

## **Part V: Mechanical and design considerations**

This isn't really a game design or deep-mechanics essay, but the following issues bear at least mentioning.

RPGs vary quite a lot in how character sheets, or rather the fictional entity "the characters," change. However, they don't vary evenly. First, the field is heavily skewed toward including such change in the first place, even in games in which such change has nothing to do with any other aesthetic or procedural feature. Second, as a historical artifact, the change itself is heavily skewed toward two things: damage including death, and improvement.

None of which is my present point, but it sets the stage for what is: that we should deeply consider both how and whether to include mechanics-based links between conflict resolutions and any sort of character development (consequence, transformation, whatever you want to call it). Obviously, such links are a major design consideration in many recent independent games and the topic is directly or indirectly constantly undergoing revision at the Forge.

It's easy to understand why, when Story Now is involved. At the fictional level, characters' value systems come under fire, and at the mechanical level, their sheets are altered by the consequence mechanics. These are a natural fit for one another. Since the original tourney-D&D context of "survive, power-up, and get rich, or die," doesn't apply, nor does its watered-down and somewhat incoherent continuance across hundreds of other games, we had to make our own new methods from scratch. And again, since Story Now design has typically favored the character-centric approach probably due to the influence of Sorcerer, consequences and transformations for the *characters* have seen the most work. My Life with Master and Dogs in the Vineyard are so remarkable in this precise feature that they have practically created a whole design field which may well be perceived as the working range.

But now for my real point: equivalent mechanics for the consequences upon *setting* are rare. The situation is analogous to the RPG spectrum in the 1990s, in which reward systems ("the fun") were rarely supported by mechanics at all, because games tended merely to recapitulate some version of point-buy currency increases for character improvement. Whereas for setting, the historical default is for there to be little if any such things, so that's what we see across the games today.

The field's not entirely bare, though. An early and significant exception can be found in Everway, and it's not like we lack a standout example for the potential to be mined, namely in HeroQuest. Both of these games (or rather Hero Wars, the first version of HeroQuest, in the latter case) deeply influenced

Trollbabe, which I think turned out to be an interesting, tuned hybrid of the character-centric and setting-centric concepts.

Perhaps it's easier to consider mechanics of these kinds when the setting is granted a degree of epic consequence, as in *Burning Empires*, in which character actions can and do affect the fate of worlds, or arguably, *Spione*, in which they don't affect the fate of Berlin but do affect the fates of many people in it. Also, there's been a strong design trend toward small-scale, tight and limited scenario games, some of which seem more like skits or plays in scope; in many of these, the setting-specific scenario features I've tried to outline in this essay are built solidly into the whole existence of the game.

## **Part VI: Incidentals and peripherals, and a little bitching**

A lot of things I wrote about so far carry whole new essays' worth of discussion within them, which I had to skip because I wanted to make a single point with this essay rather than provide a completist textbook for any and all related issues. But since everything in role-playing is connected, I'll provide a glimpse of my thoughts for a few that I really had to force myself not to go into in the sections above.

### Metaplot

This is a secondary textual issue regarding *Story Before* play, in that "the story" preparation is generated not only by a person or a person with an isolated adventure-book, but by a whole line of sequentially-published adventures and revised sourcebooks for the setting. Since actually carrying this out at the table significantly ramps up the difficulties I described, I am pessimistic regarding whether anyone really accomplished it, or if they did, regarding whether it was any fun. If my observations are any indication, the general widespread result (and this was *the* single perceived successful way to publish and recommended way to play in gamer culture by the early 1990s) was to transform a hobby of gamers and nascent designers into a mere captive market of periodical buyers and readers.

The historical discussion about textual metaplot as such is too big to go into here. I think a good example can be found in the fate of R. Talsorian regarding the original version of *Cyberpunk* and *Castle Falkenstein*. Effectively they slipped into metaplot-type publishing by degrees, thereby badly undercutting the *Story Now* potential of the core books as well as tanking the company itself.

One really interesting issue that the metaplot discussion does bring up, though, is how large-scale changing setting can be a feature of play, above the possible influence of the characters. When this is or is not functional is a fascinating question, with the overriding example of *Glorantha* constantly present through the hobby's history to investigate more fully.

People who know me probably wonder why this essay doesn't go medieval on games published by White Wolf. My take is that White Wolf game design (which I still refuse to call "Storyteller") and later, similar imitations like games published by AEG, are a secondary phenomenon derived from late-1980s models provided by WEG (*Star Wars*) and FASA (*Shadowrun*). The origins of this model lie in economics and distribution practices. Although White Wolf games may exemplify the issues I'm talking about,

particularly Illusionism, they didn't invent it and there are historical reasons why their designs went the direction they did. So there's no point in getting bent out of shape about that here.

### Story After

So there's Story Before, Story Now ... is there Story After? Sure. Any kind of role-playing in which characters do stuff which doesn't really have much consequence in play, or it's hard for anyone to see how it might, can be made into a story in retrospect by adjusting the recorded or remembered content. Groups do this all the time without realizing it, exerting selective memory of the twenty minutes of fun "packed into" four hours of play per session to produce nostalgic memories of that incredible epic story we all played for years.

Story After play, though, goes one step further, making this part of the process session by session. Therefore between sessions or at the start of a new one, the players learn how what happened last time generated plot events, which are now the context for whatever actions they might take this time. The point is that play itself doesn't make a story "on the ground," but provides raw material for selective interpretation and use by one person afterward, the results of which are then folded into the next round of play.

It's interesting for purposes of this essay because in playing this way, appreciation of the setting may well be a front-and-center, experiential aspect. I haven't been sympathetic to the idea but it may have quite functional applications given that priority.

### Problematic term: "sandbox"

Recent discussions among the self-described Old School Renaissance have revived and extended the term "sandbox play," but have failed to define it.

As far as I can tell, it can mean anything but railroading, but that means it can include the whole range of Story Before, Now, or After, and the whole range of setting use from barely-any to all-encompassing. Which makes it pretty hard to talk about outside of a given group's actual play experience. The term is also completely unconstructed regarding the size of a sandbox or if it's supposed to have a size relative to the whole setting, regarding how changes to the setting procedurally occur.

In other words, the term means almost entirely nothing, and I think it's kind of a shibboleth based on romantic notions of "Gygaxian play" (another everyone-knows but can't-define term) and imagined notions of what it's like, or must have been like, to play *The Keep on the Borderlands*.

### Glorantha

Some topics are simply too big. The day is a long, long way off that someone actually manages to summarize and critique this setting, the game systems it's been associated with, the fan culture that's grown up around it, and the various goals of play that have been attempted in it, let alone the fact that any such summary will also have to be an effective and accurate summary of the entire history of the hobby.

Here I'll mention a relatively minor issue, the concept of "Your Glorantha May Vary" as articulated for the release of Hero Wars and continued through the later editions of HeroQuest. Glorantha fandom has interpreted the phrase in a variety of ways, partly due to status games over who's more versed in or more loyal to the setting, but I've steered clear from those discussions. So my interpretation is strictly my own (although I will "Greg" you if you argue with me about it, so there).

As I see it, it means abandoning the older notion that everyone playing with Glorantha as the setting was somehow playing *together* in the *same* fictional setting. The auxiliary concept that anything played using the setting automatically entered the ever-growing canon is abandoned with it. I think it means that Glorantha becomes yours, locally, when you use it as a setting for your group's role-playing, and whatever you make of its written content, as well as whatever you do to it through play, are free to be whatever they are. As such, the HeroQuest version of Glorantha becomes a spectacularly fruitful and powerful setting for Story Now play, especially since it does in fact include setting-affecting mechanics. I'd love to see more examples of it.