What follows is a scrap of trivia . . . my collection of RPG plots, in abstract form. I built this by examining the premises of hundreds of published adventures for all systems (including those systems dear and departed from print), trying to boil them down to common denominators. The results are presented here: arbitrary, and sometimes redundant. Nevertheless, I turn to this list when I'm stuck for a fresh premise for next week's session of my campaign, whatever that campaign might happen to be about at the time. It helps me keep from falling into thematic ruts (my least favorite kind). With any luck, it might serve a similar function for you.

BIG LIST
Of RPG Plots

Notes: The "plots" are arranged in alphabetical order by title. Since the titles are arbitrary, this serves no useful function at all. And if you want Shakespearean five-act hoozits, plot trees, Man Versus Himself and other Serious Literary Bunkum, try Writer's Digest. This ain't Oxford, baby.

Any Old Port in a Storm

The PCs are seeking shelter from the elements or some other threat, and come across a potential place to hole up. They find that they have stumbled across something dangerous, secret, or supernatural, and must then deal with it in order to enjoy a little rest.

Common Twists & Themes: The shelter contains the cause of the threat the PCs were trying to avoid. The shelter houses a Hidden Base (q.v.). The PCs must not only struggle for shelter, they must struggle to survive. The place IS a legitimate shelter of some kind, but the PCs are not welcome, and must win hearts or minds to earn their bed for the night.

Better Late Than Never

Some bad guys have arrived and done some bad guy things. The PCs were none the wiser. The bad guys have now made good their escape, and the PCs have caught wind of it in time to chase them down before they make it back to their lair, their home nation, behind enemy lines, etc.

Common Twists & Themes: The bad guys escaped by stealing a conveyance that the PCs know better than they do. The bad guys duck down a metaphorical (or literal) side-road, trying to hide or blend into an environment (often one hostile to the PCs).

Blackmail

Usually through trickery (but sometimes by digging into the PCs' past), an antagonist has something to hold over the heads of the PCs and make them jump. This could be any kind of threat from physical to social, but it must be unique and depend on the villain having something - even if it's information - that others don't have. Now, he is pulling the strings of the PCs, telling them to do things they don't want to. The PCs must end the cycle of blackmail, deprive the villain of his edge, and keep him temporarily satisfied while doing it.

Common Twists & Themes: The adventure hook involves the PCs doing the villain a good turn, which allows him to take advantage of them (very cynical!). To succeed, the PCs must contact other folks that are also being used.

Breaking and Entering

Mission objective: enter the dangerous place, and retrieve the vital dingus or valuable person. Overcome the area's defenses to do so.

Common Twists & Themes: The goal is not to extract a thing, but to destroy a thing or interfere with a process (kill the force-screen generator, assassinate the evil king, stop the spell from being cast, wreck the invasion plans, close the portal). The goal has moved. The goal is information which must be broadcast or otherwise released from the area as soon as it is found. The job must be done without alerting anyone. The PCs don't know the place is dangerous.

Capture the Flag

The PCs must secure a military target for the good guys. There are bad guys there that prefer NOT to be secured. The fundamental tactical scenario.

Common Twists & Themes: The PCs must assemble and/or train a force to do the job with them.

Clearing The Hex

There is a place where bad things live. The PCs must make it safe for nice people, systematically clearing it of danger.

Common Twists & Themes: The bad things can't be beaten with direct conflict. The PCs must learn more about them to solve the problem. The Haunted House. The Alien Infestation.

Cry For Help

A person, creature, or group is in a hazardous situation that they can't survive without rescue. The PCs are on the job. In some scenarios, the hook is as simple as a distant yell.

Common Twists & Themes: There is a danger that any rescue attempts will strand the rescuers with the rescuees, compounding the problem. The rescuees aren't people, but animals, robots, or something else. The "victim" doesn't realize that he needs rescuing; he thinks he's doing something reasonable and/or safe.

Delver's Delight

The PCs are treasure-hunters, who have caught wind of a treasure-laden ruin. They go to explore it, and must deal with its supernatural denizens to win the treasure and get out alive.

Common Twists & Themes: The treasure itself is something dangerous. The treasure isn't in a ruin, but in a wilderness or even hidden somewhere "civilized."

Don't Eat The Purple Ones

The PCs are stranded in a strange place, and must survive by finding food and shelter, and then worry about getting back home.

Common Twists & Themes: This is a common "hook layer" for Running the Gauntlet (q.v.). The PCs must survive only for a short period of time, until help arrives, the ship and/or radio is repaired, or some such thing (in "repair" scenarios, sometimes the PCs must discover some fact about the local environment that will make such repairs possible).

Elementary, My Dear Watson

A crime or atrocity has been committed; the PCs must solve it. They must interview witnesses (and prevent them from being killed), gather clues (and prevent them from being stolen or ruined). They must then assemble proof to deliver to the authorities, or serve as personal ministers of justice.

Common Twists & Themes: The PCs are working to clear an innocent already accused (possibly themselves). The scale is highly variable for this type of adventure, from a small-town murder to a planetwide pollution scandal.

Escort Service

The PCs have a valuable object or person which needs to be taken to a safe place, or to its rightful owner, etc.. They must undertake a dangerous journey in which one or more factions (and chance and misfortune) try to deprive them of the thing in their care.

Common Twists & Themes: The thing or person is troublesome, and tries to escape or sidetrack the PCs. The destination has been destroyed or suborned by the enemy, and the PCs must take upon themselves the job that either the destination or their charge was meant to do when it got there. The person is a person attempting a political defection. Safe arrival at the destination doesn't end the story; the PCs must then bargain with their charge as their token (exchanging money for a hostage, for instance).

Fugitive

Someone is gone, and wants to be gone. He is either dangerous, and escaped from a facility designed to protect the public, or valuable, and escaped from a facility designed to keep him safe, cozy, and conveniently handy. The PCs must locate the fugitive, and capture him.

Common Twists & Themes: The fugitive is actually a Missing Person (q.v.) who didn't want to escape. The fugitive has a reason for leaving that the PCs will sympathize with.

Good Housekeeping

The PCs are placed in charge of a large operation (a trading company, a feudal barony, the CIA) and must, despite lack of experience in such things, make it work and thrive.

Common Twists & Themes: The PCs are brought in because something big is about to happen, and the Old Guard want a chance to escape. The PCs are resented by the peasants, neighbors, employees, etcetera, because their method of inheritance looks outwardly bad and everybody loved the old boss.

Help is on the Way

The PCs must go to the assistance of a group under siege by enemy forces, and get them out and/or break the siege.

Common Twists & Themes: The group under siege can't leave; something immobile and vital must be tended to or dealt with at the adventure location. The PCs begin within the siege, and must escape and gather forces or resources to bring back and proceed as above.

Hidden Base

The PCs, while traveling or exploring, come across a hornet's nest of bad guys, preparing for Big Badness. They must either find some way to get word to the good guys, or sneak in and disable the place themselves, or a combination of both.

Common Twists & Themes: The PCs must figure out how to use local resources in order to defend themselves or have a chance against the inhabitants.

How Much For Just The Dingus?

Within a defined area, something important and valuable exists. The PCs (or their employers) want it, but so do one or more other groups. The ones that get it will be the ones that can outthink and outrace the others, deal best with the natives of the area, and learn the most about their target. Each competing group has its own agenda and resources.

Common Twists & Themes: The natives require the competing factions to gather before them as pals to state their cases. The valuable thing was en route somewhere when its conveyance or courier wrecked or vanished.

I Beg Your Pardon?

The PCs are minding their own business when they are attacked or threatened. They don't know why. They must solve the mystery of their attacker's motives, and in the meantime fend off more attacks. They must put two and two together to deal with the problem.

Common Twists & Themes: The PCs have something that the bad guys want - but they don't necessarily realize it. The bad guys are out for revenge for a dead compatriot from a previous adventure.

Long or Short Fork When Dining On Elf?

The PCs are a diplomatic vanguard, trying to open up (or shore up) either political or trade relations with a strange culture. All they have to do is manage for a day or so among the strange customs without offending anybody . . . and what information they have is both incomplete and dangerously misleading.

Common Twists & Themes: The PCs were chosen by somebody who knew they weren't prepared for it - an NPC trying to sabotage the works (pinning this villain might be necessary to avert disaster).

Missing Memories

One or more of the PCs wakes up with no memory of the recent past, and now they find themselves in some kind of trouble they don't understand. The PCs must find the reason for the memory lapse, and solve any problems they uncover in the meantime.

Common Twists & Themes: The forgetful PCs voluntarily suppressed or erased the memories, and they find themselves undoing their own work.

Missing Persons

Somebody is gone, or lost, or simply hasn't called home in a while. The PCs must travel to where he was last believed to be to solve the mystery of his whereabouts. Those responsible for the disappearance must be contended with.

Common Twists & Themes: The missing person is actually a Fugitive (q.v.). The missing person has been abducted specifically to lure in the PCs. The missing person stumbled across another adventure (either as protagonist or victim), which the PCs must then undertake themselves. The missing "person" is an entire expedition or pilgrimage of some kind. The "missing" person is somebody that the catalyst NPC(s) have never actually met; the goal is to not only find the person, but find out why he's avoided meeting the catalyst.

Most Peculiar, Momma

Something both bad and inexplicable is happening (racial tension is being fired up in town, all the power is out, the beer supply is drained, it's snowing in July, Voyager has been renewed for another season), and a lot of people are very troubled by it. The PCs must track the phenomenon to its source, and stop it.

Common Twists & Themes: The PCs think they are on another case entirely. The PCs are somehow unwittingly responsible for the whole thing. What seems to be a problem of one nature (technological, personal, biological, chemical, magical, political, etc.) is actually a problem of an alternate one.

No One Has Soiled The Bridge

The PCs are assigned to guard a single vital spot (anything from a mountain pass to a solar system) from impending attack. They must plan their defensive strategy, set up watches, set traps, and so on, and then deal with the enemy when it arrives.

Common Twists & Themes: The intelligence the PCs was given turns out to be faulty, but acting on the new information could result in greater danger - but so could NOT acting on it, and the PCs must choose or create a compromise.

Not In Kansas

The PCs are minding their own business and find themselves transported to a strange place. They must figure out where they are, why they are there and how to escape.

Common Twists & Themes: They were brought there specifically to help someone in trouble. They were brought there by accident, as a by-product of something strange and secret. Some of the PCs' enemies were transported along with them (or separately), and now they have a new battleground, and innocents to convince which guys are the good guys.

Ounces of Prevention

A villain or organization is getting ready to do something bad, and the PCs have received a tip-off of some sort. They must investigate to find out more about the caper, and then act to prevent it.

Common Twists & Themes: The initial tip-off was a red herring meant to distract the PCs from the actual caper.

Quest For the Sparkly Hoozits

Somebody needs a dingus (to fulfill a prophecy, heal the monarch, prevent a war, cure a disease, or what have you). The PCs must find a dingus. Often an old dingus, a mysterious dingus, and a powerful dingus. The PCs must learn more about it to track it down, and then deal with taking it from wherever it is.

Common Twists & Themes: The dingus is incomplete when found (one of the most irritating and un-fun plot twists in the universe). Somebody already owns it. The dingus is information, or an idea, or a substance, not a specific dingus.

Recent Ruins

A town, castle, starship, outpost, or other civilized construct is lying in ruins. Very recently, it was just dandy. The PCs must enter the ruins, explore them, and find out what happened.

Common Twists & Themes: Whatever ruined the ruins (including mean people, weird radiation, monsters, a new

race, ghosts) is still a threat; the PCs must save the day. The inhabitants destroyed themselves. The "ruins" are a derelict ship or spaceship, recently discovered. The "ruin" is a ghost town, stumbled across as the PCs travel - but the map says the town is alive and well.

Road Race

The PCs are participants in a race. They must win. The other contestants are less honest, and the PCs must overcome their attempts to win dishonestly.

Common Twists & Themes: The "race" is instead a contest or scavenger hunt. The PCs are competing for a deeper purpose than victory, such as to keep another contestant safe or spy on one. The PCs don't wish to win; they just wish to prevent the villain from winning.

Running the Gauntlet

The PCs must travel through a hazardous area, and get through it without being killed, robbed, humiliated, debased, diseased, or educated by whatever is there. The troubles they encounter are rarely personal in nature - the place itself is simply highly dangerous in some way.

Common Twists & Themes: The place isn't dangerous at all, and the various "dangers" are actually attempts to communicate with the party by some agent or another.

Safari

The PCs are on a hunting expedition, to capture or kill and elusive and prized creature. They must deal with its environment, its own ability to evade them, and possibly its ability to fight them.

Common Twists & Themes: The creature is immune to their devices and weapons. There are other people actively protecting the creature. The creature's lair allows the PCs to stumble onto another adventure.

Stalag 23

The PCs are imprisoned, and must engineer an escape, overcoming any guards, automatic measures, and geographic isolation their prison imposes on them.

Common Twists & Themes: Something has happened in the outside world and the prison security has fallen lax because of it. The PCs have been hired to "test" the prison - they aren't normal inmates. Other prisoners decide to blow the whistle for spite or revenge.

Take Us To Memphis and Don't Slow Down

The PCs are on board a populated conveyance (East Indiaman, Cruise Ship, Ferry, Sleeper Starship), when it is hijacked. The PCs must take action while the normals sit and twiddle.

Common Twists & Themes: The "hijackers" are government agents pulling a complicated caper, forcing the PCs to choose sides. The hijackers don't realize there is a secondary danger that must be dealt with, and any attempt to convince them is viewed as a trick.

Troublemakers

A bad guy (or a group of them) is causing trouble. The PCs have to go where the trouble is, locate the bad guys, and stop the party.

Common Twists & Themes: The PCs must not harm the perpetrator(s); they must be bagged alive and well. The bad guys have prepared something dangerous and hidden as "insurance" if they are captured. The "bad guy" is a monster or dangerous animal (or an intelligent creature that everybody thinks is a monster or animal).

Uncharted Waters

The PCs are explorers, and their goal is to enter an unknown territory and scope it out. Naturally, the job isn't just going to be surveying and drawing sketches of local fauna; something is there, something fascinating and threatening.

Common Twists & Themes: Either the place itself is threatening (in which case the PCs must both play National Geographic and try to escape with their skin, sanity, and credit rating) or the place itself is very valuable and wonderful, and something ELSE there is keen on making sure the PCs don't let anyone else know. Other potential conflicts involve damage to the PCs' conveyance or communication equipment, in which case this becomes Don't Eat the Purple Ones.

We're On The Outside Looking In

Any of the basic plots in this list can be reengineered with the PCs on the outside of it. Either the PCs are accompanying other characters in the midst of such a plot (often being called on to defend the plot from the outside, as it were), or they are minding their own business when the others involved in the plot show up, and must pick sides or simply resist. For instance, with Any Old Port In The Storm, the PCs could already be enjoying (or native to) the shelter when a strange group arrives. If the "the PCs are unwelcome" variant is employed, then perhaps the PCs will be the only voice of reason to still the religious fervor, racial prejudice, anti-monster sentiment, or whatever else is the source of conflict.

Common Twists & Themes: The PCs find themselves on the receiving end of the adventure. Take any of the plots here and reverse them, placing the PCs in the position where NPCs (often the villain, fugitive, etcetera) normally are.