

Roleplaying Tips Presents: Game Master Tools

# CAMPAIGN CREATION GUIDE

Essays on How to Create Killer Campaigns



Mike Bourke,  
Johnn Four  
[roleplayingtips.com](http://roleplayingtips.com)

# Campaign Creation Guide

*Essays on How to Build Killer Campaigns*

by Johnn Four

Special thanks to Mike Bourke  
of [campaignmastery.com](http://campaignmastery.com)  
for supplying articles and advice

Fantasy Landscape Forest Red art by Jeremy Hart

Errors? Omissions? [Please let me know](#)

Get more game master tips at [RoleplayingTips.com](http://RoleplayingTips.com)

Copyright Johnn Four, RoleplayingTips.com



# Table of Contents

<b>Brief Word From Johnn.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Idea Seeds: A Campaign Design Method.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>How to Add Pizzazz With a Great Campaign Name.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Turning Coal Into Diamonds .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>12 Steps To An Epic Campaign.....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>6 Tips For Starting &amp; Planning A Campaign .....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>My Campaign Planning Cycle .....</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Been There, Done That, Doing It Again – The Sequel Campaign .....</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Sprouts and Saplings.....</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>Final Thoughts .....</b>	<b>134</b>
<b>More GM Books &amp; Resources .....</b>	<b>135</b>

## Brief Word From Johnn

The Campaign Creation Guide contains more two types of tips that complement the Campaign Seeds book. The first type gives you more ideas and help on creating campaign seeds, from brainstorming to creating great names.

The second tip type takes several steps beyond the campaign seed into a fantastic campaign design method by Mike Bourke. Follow his 12 steps and you will have a robust, imaginative, and playable campaign plan.

This guide ends with some examples of how I plan my campaigns every two weeks, and how I keep my campaigns on track all the way through to memorable campaign endings.

I feel campaigns are the best way to go for RPGs, as opposed to running one adventure at a time by the seat of your pants. The continuity, character development, and larger stories you can tell fit comfortably with a campaign's borders, but not so much an adventure's.

These days, with real life intruding more and more on my games, I've started planning shorter campaigns, just 1-2 years long, because reaching the end of a campaign is so satisfying and builds momentum to keep my busy group together and eager to show up each session.

Hopefully this guide helps you build and run amazing campaigns and RPG experiences.

# Idea Seeds: A Campaign Design Method

By Mike Bourke, [campaignmastery.com](http://campaignmastery.com)

There are a lot of techniques for campaign design and construction out there. What makes this technique different is it lets the subconscious desires of the GM flavour the campaign directly over time, through the process, so the campaign more closely resembles what the GM wants to run - whether he realizes it or not.

The Idea Seeds Campaign Design Method builds on two core components: idea seeds and process iterations:

## 1) Idea Seeds

The GM starts with a clean sheet of paper (or better yet, word processor document) and writes down a number of one-word nouns. These words are the idea seeds from which the campaign design will evolve, like mighty trees emerging from small acorns.

## 2) Process Iteration

Small, simple steps performed repeatedly make light work of large tasks. There might be more powerful tools out there for developing ideas, but this is one of the easiest.

## Phase 1 - The Idea Seeds Sprout

Follow these steps to craft the idea seeds:

### Step 1. Brainstorm Topics

List three to twelve nouns on the page. These should be words you expect to have significance in the new campaign.

For example:

- king
- goblin
- sorcerer
- war
- assassin

### Step 2. Add Detail

Add a single adjective to each word, before or after as you see fit.

For example:

- frozen king
- heroic goblin
- sorcerer vile
- war melancholy
- assassin guild

To spur your creativity, write adjectives on separate scraps of paper and draw them at random, rejecting a combination only if there is no way the pair could go together.

### **Step 3. Start Connecting**

Add necessary adverbs and linking words so each item is the start of a proper sentence:

- The frozen king
- A heroic goblin
- A sorcerer vile
- The war against melancholy
- The assassin guild

### **Step 4. Multiply**

Pick two or three of these and pluralize them:

- The wars against melancholy
- The assassins' guild

### **Step 5. Add Time**

Pick half of the results and tag them as referring to the campaign's past and the other half referring to the campaign present.

- The frozen king (past)
- A heroic goblin (past)

## Campaign Creation Guide

- A sorcerer vile (now)
- The wars against melancholy (now)
- The assassins' guild (now)

### **Step 6. Polish**

Complete the sentences appropriately. Think of them as summaries of a status report by an intelligence advisor. Try to make them event oriented, as well.

- The Frozen King awaited release from his icy grave.
- A heroic goblin slew the great beast and claimed dominion.
- A sorcerer vile demands the slaves be freed.
- The wars against melancholy fair poorly in the Western Wasteland.
- The Assassins' Guild awaits their commission.

### **Phase 2 - The Saplings Grow**

Now the fun starts. Do exactly the same thing again, but each time you complete a new sentence, append it to a previous one of your choosing.

Continue until you have 20 to 30 separate items. Build up the story, one sentence at a time. This not only creates new ideas, it forces the evolution of new ones. By the time you have started this phase of the process, the initial sentences should already be sparking ideas and interpretations.

## Campaign Creation Guide

With some statements, you might have no idea how they are going to fit in. That's okay, these won't go anywhere and will ultimately be discarded.

Also look for ways to connect one statement with another. If necessary, change what you've already got.

The statements generated above, for example, suggest a number of things to me:

*"A heroic goblin slew the great beast and claimed dominion,"* suggests goblins have somehow conquered everything, perhaps by seizing control of a dragon's hoard.

*"A sorcerer vile demands the slaves be freed"* implies a brewing slave revolt.

*"The Frozen King awaited release from his icy grave"* might be talking about necromancy, or it might be that the rightful ruler of these parts had been frozen and his body hidden in a glacier somewhere. Or both.

Right away, we have the makings of a number of campaigns - perhaps the party are to be goblins and quislings, seeking to maintain the status quo by putting down the rebellion. Or perhaps they are to be escaped slaves who are to join the rebellion, and the ultimate goal of the campaign is the overthrow of the heroic goblin (or his successor). Perhaps it's more of a P.O.W. campaign in which the PCs' primary goal is just to stay out of goblin hands, and in which all the other adventures are side issues. Maybe the goblins are good and

enlightened rulers who permit their nominal "slaves" a great deal of freedom, a sort of blend of the first two interpretations.

### **Phase 3 - The Canopy**

Trees without leaves are just bare bones. When you have enough ideas, take each one and rewrite it from start to finish, attempting to flesh it out with all the ancillary information - who, what, when, where, why, and how.

As you finish each one, attempt to jot down several adventure ideas for the PCs, again as one-sentence statements.

*"The PCs must overcome the ice hydra that guards the Frozen King."*

*"The party encounters the sorcerer vile and finds he is not what he appears to be."*

If there is a question or implication of the sentences, this is the time to explore it.

### **Phase 4 - Pruning**

One advantage of having so many ideas is you can happily discard those that don't fit and just retain those elements that are useful. *"The War against Melancholy goes poorly in the Western Wasteland"* sounds good, but most of the ideas it generates in my mind are insipid. This would mean it got little or no expansion in phase 2 and was ignored in phase 3. Now is

the time to dump it, and retain only the useful idea - a Western Wasteland, some sort of badlands or desert region.

### **Phase 5 - Seeing the Forest Instead of the Trees**

When you have finished all of this it's time to get a rough idea of the campaign topology. Just from our initial ideas, we have a Western Wasteland, a frozen (arctic) region, a power base for the goblins, a former dragon's lair, the remnants of the former kingdom - fortresses, cities (perhaps laid to waste by the dragon), and so on - all manner of landmarks. It's time to do a rough map of the campaign area. Check each statement in your idea write-ups to ensure consistency.

### **Phase 6 - Run Through the Jungle**

Finally, take your scenario ideas and rank them in order of difficulty and emotional appeal. Fiddle with the list if any would be disrupted by the outcome of an earlier idea. If an idea suggests itself, throw in a plot twist that enables the scenario to proceed in order, despite the earlier events.

For example, it would be difficult to have a scenario involving a mission for the goblin king after the PCs have overthrown him. You have to move the overthrow to later in the campaign structure and toughen it up, or you have to add some twist into the outcome of the earlier scenario. Perhaps the goblin king escapes or is exiled instead of being killed, and is then

forced to call upon his greatest enemies, despite his animosity toward them. Emotional appeal suggests the first solution - but perhaps you have an even bigger climax in mind in which the overthrow of the goblin king is only a stepping stone.

**Keep in mind you can't force a future outcome. The PCs should dictate the course of gameplay.** You can, however, anticipate and plan accordingly, and revise as the campaign matures.

It is also worthwhile identifying any themes that are suggested, encapsulating them in a single pithy statement or two.

By the time you have finished this process - and it need only take an hour or two - you are ready to start writing scenarios and rolling up player characters.

### **Application of Technique: Off-The-Cuff Campaigns**

I've had great success with off-the-cuff campaigns. One has run for more than 25 years, another is currently in its 9th year, and still another is 8 years old. The idea seeds technique works for off-the-cuff campaigns because you can do lots of the work after play has started!

For example, with just the initial ideas - which took all of ten minutes to devise - I could run an "escape from the goblins" scenario, perhaps ending at a cliff-hanger as a voice from the

darkness calls, "Throw down your weapons - you're surrounded!" I can then decide in the gap between sessions who the voice is - agents of the "sorcerer vile" perhaps, or maybe the PCs have blundered into the hiding place of the Red Guild - and fill in their back story.

This sort of "mosaic" campaign design has the advantage of minimising advance work, a big time-saving for the busy referee, but it relies on the GM's ability to improvise.

### **Extending the Technique - Towns & Other Communities**

You can put the same technique to use in a number of other areas. Since these uses are generally smaller and less important than the whole campaign, you can get away with fewer ideas.

Three ideas are ample to generate a small town:

1. The dominant terrain
2. A prominent citizen
3. Something the town takes civic pride in

#### **Seeds to Generate**

NPCs: three or four

Towers and garrisons:  
three or four

Small town: three

City: five to six

Capital city: six to ten

## Campaign Creation Guide

Instead of generating scenario ideas, I'm looking for *encounters*. Building the list along these lines permits the generation of a small, unique town in no time flat: "Little Morton, the cleanest community west of the Pichanto Marshes, home of the annual Strawberry Festival."

Cleanest community can have all sorts of meanings, from the obvious physical fact to the cultural (20 lashes for swearing) to the business (bars serve only goat milk and must close an hour after sunset). Throw in an enchanted still in someone's basement and the Strawberry Festival can get well and truly out of hand just in time for the PCs to visit. Or perhaps the festival is the only time the town permits alcohol to be served (strawberry daiquiris anyone?).

Cities tend to be larger, and frequently are home to power struggles of various types and other contradictory drives. Perhaps the shabbiest part of town is also the richest because hoarding is a way of life here (an idea described to great effect in *The Revenge Of Anthalus* by David Eddings). Use five or six ideas for a city, six to ten for the capital.

Guard towers, garrisons and the like only need three or four ideas, the same as a small town. Here the emphasis is on:

1. The threat the landmark exists to repel
2. The geography
3. The attitude of the commander
4. How the outpost is supplied and how often

## **Extending the Technique - NPCs**

You also use this method to give yourself a basic description of NPCs. Three to four ideas again suffice. I choose from:

- Personality
- Ambition
- Appearance
- Dress
- Occupation

If you want, you can do each of these, though it's generally better for consistency to work from three, prune one if necessary, and decide the rest based on the concept given.

It has been suggested to me that basing the number of attributes examined in this way on the intelligence of the character is more realistic. Hobbies, politics, history, family, relationships, and crimes can all be added to the list of attributes if you want. This has the advantage of giving intelligent NPCs more complex personalities, while the village idiot gets only one or two dominant characteristics - more might be wasted on such a one-dimensional character.

## **Extending the Technique - Rewards**

Using the same technique can be useful when it comes to hoards and treasures and other rewards and can add lots of colour and uniqueness to the goodies you hand out. Perhaps instead of ioun stones you hand out enchanted butterflies that

## Campaign Creation Guide

perpetually flap around the character's head, or a box kite of flying, or a stairway of slipperiness, or a lyre of stone giant strength. It might be a password into a rival's computer system, a gift card instead of a financial reward, or being listed as a government contractor with an unusual department (a false identity), or...well, you get the idea.

The advantages to generating rewards this way is you can incorporate the themes of the encounter and its locale. Treasures tend to be more consistent in nature with each other and with the encounter situation that leads to the reward, and the uniqueness of the reward makes things more interesting in and of itself.

Which sounds more interesting to you: \$10,000 or a Platinum Gi-mex Trading Card with \$10,000 credit? Linking the rewards to the situation helps maintain the realism of both the encounters and the campaign as a whole. And besides, it's fun!



That's not the end of the utility of this simple technique. I have also used it to generate battle strategies, emplace dungeon traps, design monster encounters, invent ecologies, devise weather patterns, concoct alien societies, and create themed dungeons. You name it. Whatever you need, this technique will help you design it.

# How to Add Pizzazz With a Great Campaign Name

*By Johnn Four*

Naming your campaign is important. It provides theme, brings a party together, and gives the group identity. It's a small tool to add flavour and interest.

At first the name is a simple identifier. But the best names eventually become a source of energy for the group. A name gets associated with good times, fun, and great friends. The name becomes a movement, an emotion. It stops being mere words and embodies what RPG means to each player. In this way, a great name that catches on can help your campaign reach a successful conclusion by keeping the momentum going.

The three tips below will help you craft an awesome campaign name. If you are mid-campaign and don't have a strong name yet, these tips can help you add one as well.

## **1. Campaign Name Inspiration**

What are the best types of campaign names? Ones that have extra meaning to the players. Pack extra information into the name to give additional dimension. The group might realize this value immediately, or it might be revealed as the campaign unfolds. Either way, it's pure gold.

### **End Goal**

If your campaign has a single purpose or objective, you might name it after this. A great focus tool for keeping players on track with the story. The name need not imply how the goal should be met, just what the objective is.

Example: *The Brink of War*. The PCs learn civil war is about to erupt, either due to their actions in the early days of the campaign, or from events orchestrated by NPCs. At first, the campaign name adds a bit of mystery and drama. Once they realize their role is to prevent fratricide (could be PC families and friends must even fight each other) the campaign name becomes a motivator and focus of their goal in the second half - stop the war.

### **Clue**

Turn the name into a clue. That'll blow your players' minds. Bonus points for a name with multiple meanings or inferences so you can use it as multiple clues.

Example: *The Terrible Gift*. As a house rule, you give each PC a bonus feat or ability, but they must take a seemingly minor character flaw to do so. Perhaps they all suffer willpower resistance penalties versus devils. "I get a bonus feat in exchange for -4 saving throws against devils? Deal!"

Then the devils make their appearance in the campaign and the PCs start suffering from missed saving throws against charm and mental manipulation powers. A terrible gift, indeed.

## Campaign Creation Guide

But then the PCs find out the devils are offering the King a wondrous surprise to celebrate his 25th year of rule. No one knows it's the devils behind the surprise, and it's up to the PCs to prove it, or at least find out what the surprise will be. Hindered with their willpower weakness, it's a difficult challenge.

Unfortunately, the whole surprise gift was a ruse. Yes, there was a terrible surprise, and if it had not been prevented the devils would have been pleased. However, while the PCs were distracting everyone in foiling this plot, the Princess receives a scroll as a small present on the King's anniversary.

The scroll shows how she can add more power to her spells with only a small, maybe unnoticeable drawback - a lower resistance versus devil mind tricks. The wizard Princess is delighted with her improved magic, and she shares this knowledge with the guild she runs - the Mage's Guild....

Even when the mages learn the terrible secret of this new knowledge, many will still take the chance, because who can resist a bit more power for no immediate pain and perhaps no future cost at all?

The kingdom is in its greatest danger ever now, as its most powerful citizens slowly become pawns of evil masters.

### **Teaser**

You are already familiar with crafting great plot hooks to launch adventures and encounters. Use these same skills to create a hook for the campaign and then use the hook as the campaign's name. The name then becomes an ongoing teaser sure to hold player interest.

A great format is to start your teaser with the word If.

- If Magic Returns
- If Dragons Ruled
- If The Crown Breaks

### **Question**

Another good format is to ask a question based on the hook:

- Where is the [relic name] Buried?
- Do Drow Sleep at Night?
- What Lies Beyond the Sea?

### **Villain**

Name your campaign after the party's enemy and they'll be sure to develop a good hate-on for that NPC. A great technique also for establishing campaign purpose and common foe.

- Venger's Requiem
- The Citadel of Shadow
- The Eye of Vecna

### **Party Hook**

Why do the PCs stick together? What is their purpose as a group? If you know this before the campaign starts you can turn the hook into the campaign's name. This is a great method for creating higher player engagement, a sense of purpose, and pride in the campaign.

- The Plane Walkers
- The Steel Oath
- Protectors of the Crown
- Band of Brothers
- The Dragon Slayers
- The Guardians of Night

### **2. Name Checklist**

Here is a quick list of elements a good name should have. For any name you consider, try to give it three or more of these elements:

- Compelling
- Memorable
- Easy to spell
- Descriptive or evocative
- Mysterious
- Dramatic
- Personal to players or PCs

### 3. Celebrate the Name

Whenever possible, use the campaign name in cool and entertaining ways. Celebrate the name by using it often:

- As the name of your campaign's website, wiki, mailing list, or web group
- Create stationery and letterhead with the name
- As the name of your campaign newsletter
- Whenever talking about the campaign to players

Use the name in-game. This is a great way to celebrate the name. Find ways to embed the name into game play. You can allude to the name, create derivatives, use parts of it, or just use the whole thing.

For example, in some movies the name is revealed during a scene. You say, aha, that's where the name of this movie comes from. Similarly, you drop the name at some critical point early on, perhaps during a tense moment of roleplay or combat.

Have NPCs use the campaign name when the characters interact with them. Enemies are good candidates for this, as they ridicule the party name, or mock the campaign name in a fourth wall type of way.

The best method I've seen for celebrating the campaign name is magic item names. Create a line or related group of magic

## Campaign Creation Guide

treasures branded after the campaign in some fashion. This can reinforce the party's identity, as well.

Create props:

- Heraldry
- Signs
- Fake contracts
- Drinking glasses for the players with the name etched in
- A signature food dish named after the campaign



Give your campaign an identity via a great name. Draw inspiration from the campaign seed, the villain, the party hook, or something in-game that ties the campaign and PCs together.

Use the name wherever you can, to increase its effect.

A great name helps make a campaign memorable and part of its real world story. My group still talks about past campaigns using the campaign names we created, and having great names during play added a lot of fun and flavor.

# Turning Coal Into Diamonds

## How to Mine Character Backstories to Create Deeper Campaigns

*By Johnn Four*

Backgrounds, backstories, timelines, and histories all cover the same thing - the past. This is compelling to us game masters because it is static. The past has come and gone, and players cannot interfere with it. It gives you a body of information under your control for you to shape and use as you see fit.

GMs who are also creative writers find a wonderful outlet in this part of the game. Backgrounds can become short stories, or at least scratch the fiction-writing itch.

If you enjoy creating and working with histories for various elements of your games, then the following tips will help you get more benefit by extracting extra value from them.

### **1. Mine All Sources For Details**

A game has several major elements, such as villains, adventures, and NPCs. Each of these is a potential source for background details and inspiration. Mine these sources.

Some sources will be obvious. But some game elements you might not have thought of will also have minable histories.

Here is a list of game elements to mine for juicy campaign details:

- Game world
- Campaign
- Villains
- Adventures
- Encounters
- Locations
- Factions
- NPCs
- PCs
- Monsters
- Magic items

### **Game World**

This will be your biggest background source. The setting itself will have a history, sometimes in the form of a timeline, and other times in the form of prose. Then there is a chance each element in the world will have a background blurb. For example, deities, races, countries, cities, and religions.

### **Campaign**

Many campaigns take the form of two or more factions in conflict, which spawns epic tales of how the sides became enemies and their past battles.

### **Villains**

These major NPCs always have a backstory, sometimes a complex one.

### **Adventures**

These almost all start with a background section. Some have a backstory that goes back millennia, and some have two or more sections with historical information, such as the adventure synopsis and the adventure background.

### **Encounters**

Individual planned encounters often have setup information that includes a bit of background. At the least, you might have detailed the setup of who is doing what, where, how, when, and why.

### **Locations**

Whether part of a planned encounter or a notable place in the setting information, locations often have background information.

Every site with construction on it, such as buildings, monuments, and engineered projects, has at minimum a building project start and end date, plus the initial reason for the building. Other locations might be the sites of notable events, be the birthplace of important NPCs, or have a history of interesting use.

### **NPCs**

Some will have fleshed out backgrounds. Others might offer a few notes to explain their personalities and motivations.

### **PCs**

Ask players to develop interesting backgrounds for their characters.

### **Magic Items**

Major items should have a backstory unless they are brand-new. Even minor items can benefit from a few background notes.

### **Factions**

These are groups of NPCs who have organised themselves or become a community for one reason or other. Backstories for factions often include why it exists, how it was founded, and actions it has taken in the past.



As you can see, there are a surprising number of sources you can mine for historical information once you put them all in a list. This is excellent news!

You can also use this tip as a best practice checklist for what game elements should have background notes to help you weave together a better integrated campaign.

## 2. Ready Your Mining Carts

Before you gather all your sources and begin mining each, you need places to store and organise all the information you dig up. There is no point wielding your axes and shovels to build a large pile of awesome nuggets you do not then ever use.

Your first problem will be to organise the information in a way that helps you plan and design, then make it serve as an excellent and accessible reference during games. Solve this by using a small number of useful tools:

- **Timeline.** A simple chronology of events.
- **Gazetteer.** A compilation of details about the setting and campaign.
- **Cast of Characters.** A listing of NPCs in your campaign.
- **Cast of Locations.** A listing of notable places in the world, campaign, and adventures. Encounter locations can get added as they are planned or played out. This is not a map, though your cast might include one. If it does, be sure to use a coordinates system and add this information to a new column in your cast.
- **Cast of Items.** A listing of notable mundane and magical things, their properties, last known location, and current possessor.
- **Pool of Hooks.** Three key types of ideas - campaign facts, plot hooks, and encounter seeds - to store as a to do list for development between games or as a handy inspiration list any time.

- **Campaign facts** are bits of true information pertaining to any aspect of your game. Perhaps it is NPC trivia, setting tid bits, or data about special game elements (people, places, and things). You can use these facts later to build up adventure and encounter details or spawn news, rumours, and clues.
- **Plot hooks** relate to your game at the story and plot level. Quests, side quests, adventures, conflicts, and events.
- **Encounter seeds** form the basis of individual encounters or encounter sequences. Recording the seed gives you a drag-and-drop format for you to apply other game elements to, when needed, to flesh things out into full encounters.

### 3. How To Mine Your Backgrounds

Mining your backgrounds now becomes a simple and hopefully fun process of digging through your sources and loading any information you pick out into the most useful mining cart.

#### Events

If something has a date, record it in your timeline. Any notable event should go into your timeline as well, and if no date is provided, estimate one.

Develop an eye for recognising events, as these are important to the foundation of your campaign. It is tricky reading through backgrounds and spotting events, because you sometimes get caught up in the story and miss them or forget

to add them to your timeline. Other times, information about an event gets split up into different paragraphs or sections and you need to piece things together.

For example, note character birth dates, when things were founded and when conflicts occurred. Another way to look at it is to record *who did what when*.

### **World Building**

Put details about your world and campaign into your gazetteer so it is always at your fingertips. Look through any world book, such as Eberron or Dark Sun, and you will see they are divided into chapters that are further divided into sections. Your gazetteer can mirror this structure, or you can create your own structure, so you can record information about gods, races, geography, cultures, and so on.

Use the gazetteer as a bucket for any information that does not relate to history, people, places, and things, as you can use the other mining carts for this information.

### **Allies, Enemies, Contacts, and Relationships**

Your world is full of people and you need a way to track them. Whenever you spot a person's name, add it to your cast of characters plus any related information about who they are, what they do, where they are located, their relationships, and their story roles.

Reversing the process, whenever an NPC is mentioned without a name, record their info and generate a name for them. This

improves the accuracy and integrity of your notes and helps you flesh out your campaign and world at the same time.

### **Notable Places For Name-Dropping & Encounter Re-Use**

Authors use the names of places as a technique to make their stories believable and entertaining. Sometimes a name will pop up in conversation, be used as a curse, or get attached to something to add detail. "This Velurian wine is magnificent."

For example, an NPC could sell a quiver full of arrows to the PCs and your game moves on. Alternatively, the merchant might offer a quiver of Red Forest elven arrows, and this could serve to add more detail to your campaign, offer a clue, give the elf player pause to consider what region his character is from, or all three.

Each time the material you sift through mentions a place, add it to the cast of locations. Use this as list of suggestions for world-building, campaign planning, and encounter design.

### **Celebrate Notable Items in Campaign Details**

The best examples are relics, major magic items, and exotic equipment. Many adventures include a special magic item in the background that eventually finds its way into an encounter and then the PCs' hands. However, few adventures take the opportunity to reveal the item's history throughout the course of the adventure to build up anticipation, so that when the group finally has its hands on it, it is a special moment.

## Campaign Creation Guide

For you, note any item mentioned in the materials. Named items are ideal. Anonymous items of significance should get added then named. If you get stuck naming something, name it after the creator, owner, or place of origin. This trick lets you highlight NPCs and locations at the same time.

In most cases, an item is implied in some action or event described in a background. Become more aware of this by asking "How?" each time something occurs.

An assassination, for example, gets noted because a significant NPC falls. But how was he killed? Likely some weapon, poison, or trap did the dirty deed. This becomes an ideal entry into your cast of items because there is fame and history attached to it. Whoever wrote the background probably did not think to consider how the assassination took place, and they were just fixed on the fact of the assassination and resulting consequences.

Let us say it was a dagger that killed Legathiel, an elven ambassador. I would enter into my cast of items "Dagger of Legathiel." If inspiration does not strike for bringing it into play immediately, then I at least have this in my list for future use. I would be inclined to make it a weapon sought after by enemies of the elves to use against them repeatedly throughout the ages, to not only kill special targets, but to add insult and dishonour because a weapon with such a reviled reputation was used. The dagger is not even magical at this

point, yet it has special significance with lots of plotting opportunities.

Use your growing cast of items as a shopping inventory tool as well. As in the Red Forest arrows example above, when the PCs go shopping you can drop in named mundane items for that extra bit of setting flair.

### **Track Your Open Loops**

Record hooks for future inspiration and spontaneous in-game linkage. You also need to know what issues are raised that would affect the setting, campaign and adventures to prevent logic errors. "Hey, what about that weird shape in the sky mentioned in my character's background? It's still there, right? I look up."

- Look for conflicts mentioned in a background. Note who was involved and what the fight was about.
- Note events that might reoccur or that affect current times in some way. Holidays are prime targets.
- Add to the pool dreams, goals, and motivations of PCs and NPCs still living.
- List anything players would perceive as treasure. They might seek these things out, or you can turn them into objects of quests.

## Campaign Creation Guide

- Note anything mysterious, especially remote, unexplored, and named places. These are all possible locations for adventurers.
- Encounters have three basic ingredients: a place, a conflict, and a time. Add to your pool of hooks proto-encounters when you spot two or three of these ingredients colliding while parsing through background materials.



To summarise, read through any background material you can lay your hands on. Just about any fact will have a place in your system of mining carts to record it. Spotting useful bits of information takes practice, and you will get better at it as you read through more backgrounds and histories.

A nice rule of thumb is if it has a date, name, or action you should record it. Be on the lookout for anything you can use to enhance gameplay by creating immersive details or hooks.

### **4. Switch to Campaign Logging**

Once you finish mining your information sources for juicy details, each mining cart becomes a real-time bucket for your ongoing campaign. When your campaign begins, switch from mining mode to logging mode to track game details and opportunities.

As you make things up while planning or GMing, shovel this information into the proper cart. This will keep facts straight

and give you deep references so you do not need to worry about having to remember everything.

### **Timeline**

This becomes a log of what the PCs do and when.

### **Gazetteer**

You will make things up on the fly as you run games. Add new items here that do not fit in the other mining carts. Add names or references during the game to act as a placeholder, then flesh them out between games.

### **Cast of Characters**

This becomes a listing of NPCs met, and the relationships they develop with each other and the PCs. For example, in my current campaign I need to track NPC attitude towards the PCs so I know who will help and who will hinder them, who will give them great service and who will charge them double, and the resulting modifiers to any social skill rolls.

### **Cast of Locations**

Log where encounters take place. The gazetteer is for big places, like countries and regions. Your Cast of Locations is for adventure-level places, like encounter locations and numbered areas on dungeon maps.

To log faster, I sometimes refer to my adventure notes in my cast. “ref: Crucible of Maya pg 13.” I can then go to that book and page to get the location description and other details.

It might also be important to log minor details during adventures, such as if doors are left open, if secret things remain undiscovered, what one-time traps are triggered. Record these on a copy of the map, if you can. This saves time, makes things visual and easier, and makes future reference faster.

The Cast of Locations becomes most important when creating places on-the-fly. I find this happens a lot when PCs travel to villages, towns, and cities. Also for wilderness encounters. The party often revisits these locations, so you need to keep your details straight.

### **Cast of Items**

This becomes your treasure and equipment list. In my campaigns characters do not automatically determine the value of treasure until they get it appraised or appraise it themselves. Even then, I record the real value and the appraised value separately in case there is a difference for any reason.

For notable equipment, I want to know who is carrying it and where. I have found asking where a certain item is out of the blue tips my hand. It makes players alert for NPC actions, such as theft, scouting, breaking, and so on.

For example, I prefer to know in advance what magical signatures PCs have without asking as an enemy mage invisibly casts detect magic nearby.

## Campaign Creation Guide

Sometimes items get lost in the shuffle as PCs fight over treasure or sell it. Your cast of items will ensure an accurate record of what stuff has actually been found. Do with this information as you see fit.



Histories, backstories, and backgrounds are filled with rich veins of material to mine for your campaigns. Reuse as much of this as possible to add incredible detail, fidelity, and immersion to your campaigns. Reused details mined from backgrounds are easier to remember. They also give you a frame in which to fit your adventures, encounters, treasure, and NPCs.

Why invent something new every time? Instead, keep using existing details and add more depth to every reuse. Soon your world and game will feel linked together, integrated, and alive.

To do this, start with the information you already have at hand: backgrounds. Almost every game element can come with a background. Read this information over. Mine all the details out. File these details into a basic system, such as the mining carts described above.

Once done, you should have a surprising amount of detail available for new adventures and encounters. When you start gameplay, build on all this detail by switching from mining mode to logging mode.

## Campaign Creation Guide

Keep your information organized in a system that lets you recall details fast for reuse. Tie details together so more and more factor into each story. With this growing body of knowledge and experience, all sorts of roleplaying, plot, and design ideas emerge on their own.

Start mining your backgrounds today.

# 12 Steps To An Epic Campaign

By Mike Bourke, [campaignmastery.com](http://campaignmastery.com)

All campaigns are different. Some are big, some small. The biggest all can be described as epic. And an epic campaign can be summed up in three terms:

1. Revelations
2. Revolutions
3. Repercussions

## Revelations

An epic campaign reveals unexpected facts about the campaign environment. Not just small ones, but ones that redefine the entire campaign, both past and present, casting it into a new context.

## Revolutions

An epic campaign permits the characters to react to the revelation in such a way that massive changes take place or are prevented from taking place.

## Repercussions

When you have a revolution, what comes afterwards is usually as profound as what came before it. There are always repercussions.

Having defined the ingredients in broad strokes, let's start looking at how you design such a campaign. There are 6 pieces of such a campaign, and each of them needs to be designed before the epic can take place.

(With experience, you can get away with only the first and a vague idea about the rest, and grow the campaign as you go along, but it's always better to have a road map in advance.)

These six epic components are:

1. Before
2. After
3. Transformations
4. Ground Rules
5. Explanations
6. Cataclysms

There are also six other ingredients that should be built into a successful epic campaign. These are:

7. Exit Clauses
8. Choices
9. Character Developments
10. Timing
11. Side Issues
12. Unpredictability

Let's look at these components, what they should contain, and how they assemble like a jigsaw puzzle to form a road map for an epic campaign.

### **I. Before**

This is the beginning.

- Define a campaign world with lots of opportunity for adventure.
- Throw in some NPCs that will fascinate the characters.
- Add places of adventure, such as dungeons.
- Add some political affiliations ("the elves are here, the dwarves are over there").
- Create a broad-based threat of some kind ("...and over here, an empire of golems has enslaved anything made of flesh in furtherance of some vast pre-programmed cause no-one understands..."). This is meant to be a combination of red herring and background plot element.

## Campaign Creation Guide

- Throw in a couple of points of uniqueness for each race, something that connects them to the campaign environment. (The elves have become obsessed with racial purity after all the true-bloods were killed off 100 years ago. The Dwarves are hostile and distrustful after the human realms used them as pawns and then left them hanging in the war that killed the true-blood elves. And so on.)

Once you have created these core starter elements, the fun starts. Next, answer these two questions:

1. How did the campaign world get into this state? Who discovered these things?
2. How have the elements interacted in the recent past? Write the history of the campaign world so far.

It's important to think about these things. Look for consequences, throw in story twists such as backstabs, unlikely alliances, and unlikely villains, and most importantly, define the style of the coming campaign.

You need to establish there have been exceptional characters in the past, how they affected society and history, and what infrastructure - social, political, and economic - has emerged to deal with such individuals in the present. That defines how the PCs will fit into the campaign world.

If the world will show no mercy to the PCs, there must be tales of the death of heroic characters of legend. If the world will be extra-nasty, there should be some ironic deaths. "He

assembled the forces who would ultimately win the day, but died of an infection before the battle could be fought." Most importantly, if you are going to have an epic flavour to the campaign, you have to have that epic flavour in the backgrounds. Massed armies, gods, demons, tales of unimaginable evil, and unparalleled heroism.

Once you have all this written up, you need to hide some of it, obscure some of it, distort some of it, oversimplify some of it, and flat out lie in some of it. Do this in a separate copy. This becomes the player's version of the background.

## **2. After**

So far, all we have is the recipe for a great campaign - not a bad start - but it's not yet an EPIC campaign. So the next requirement, having determined the starting point of the campaign, is to list everything that's going to change in the course of, and as a result of, the campaign.

For everything you list, you need two alternatives:

1. Describe the outcome if the party succeeds
2. Describe the outcome if they are...less successful

It's better if you also pick a couple of deep philosophical, conceptual, or ideological conflicts/contrasts and make those the themes of the changes.

For example:

## Campaign Creation Guide

- Collectivism vs. individualism
- Institutional religious practice vs. the gods
- Pantheistic beliefs vs. monotheism
- Nature vs. technology
- Social evolution vs. repression

Once you have these changes selected, examine each element of the campaign to figure out the impact of these contrasting outcomes.

Don't be afraid to make big changes. You also don't have to see immediately just how you will get from "before" to "after." In an epic campaign, every element of the campaign should be affected in some way, and by the time you have the various themes considered in combination there will be plenty of scope for just about any change you want.

For example, I recently ran an epic campaign in which one of the themes was the corruption of belief systems. As a consequence of that theme, near the end of the campaign, the elves adopted the worship of Lolth in defiance of their long-standing alliance with the human kingdoms, while the drow abandoned Lolth, and (after a rather turbulent period of revolution) have embraced Corellen and allied with the Human Kingdoms. The players could have prevented this outcome in various ways, but this outcome was always the lesser of two evils they were forced to choose between. The next campaign

set in that world will feature a human, an elf, a dwarf, an ogre, and an orc - as the good guys!

### **3. Transformations**

Once you know the two end points, the next step is to work out how to get from "here" to "there." First, the easy ones: is the endpoint the logical outcome of a single change in the affected group? If so, make a note of that change and start trying to think of ways to cause it.

The more complicated ones involve a dual or even a triple transformation - you need to find some intermediate step so that (a) can lead to (b), which can then lead to (c), which is where you wanted to go all along. Once again, you then need to work out triggers for those changes.

For example, the inversion in elvish religious beliefs described above started with the apparent death of Lolth. With the loss of their deity, the dwarf clerics found they no longer had access to miracles of faith. For a while, they were able to conceal this and suppress dangerous suggestions (by increasingly violent means), giving them the chance to learn the art of illusion from the (male) mages in their houses. That let them simulate the power of Lolth and begin searching for ways to restore their dark goddess. Of course, all the male mages had to be killed off, lest the secret be revealed. Slowly, word leaked out, and the loss of Lolth became common knowledge amongst them. That took the dwarf from (a) to (b).

Meanwhile, Lolth had regenerated herself, at least partially. Knowing she was vulnerable, she had prepared an escape for herself from the trap that had supposedly killed her. With her drow no longer believing in her, however, she needed to find another group of worshippers. She found them in the elves, who (as suggested in step 1) had become obsessed with genetic purity, subordinating everything else to the achievement of that goal, putting in place draconian laws more in keeping with Nazi Germany - with the loftiest of objectives, of course.

These practices slowly angered the elven god Corellan so much he washed his hands of them. The elves were ripe for the picking - taking them from (a) to (b).

With the difficult parts out of the way, it was easy for Lolth to make the most of the opportunity, while her former worshippers, no longer subject to her perverse and corrupting influence, slowly began to grow more civilized. The steps for each group from (b) to (c) were thus relatively easy.

In the course of six years of play, then, the elves went from recognisable elves to something more like fascist drow, while the drow became more like elves with a ruthless streak.

If you assume each of these changes represents a scenario, or part of a scenario, then a large part of the campaign is suddenly defined. In other words, having designed a campaign environment conducive to epic adventures, you then define a

series of such adventures for the purpose of achieving a desired change in the campaign world.

### **4. Ground Rules**

It's only fair to give the players a chance to get used to the ground rules of the campaign environment before throwing them in the deep end. At low level, that means making sure they gain awareness and appreciation of the building blocks of the campaign to come. You need a scenario to introduce these building blocks to them. Some of it can be done through PCs, some through NPC encounters, and some through adventuring.

For example, in the world above, it was important to establish the current status of drow and elves early on. Fortunately, two of the PCs were an elf and a human former slave of the drow who had escaped. It was enough simply to brief the players of those characters and to let the rest emerge through roleplay.

Since the escaped slave wouldn't have the inside story of the loss of Lolth, it was also necessary to have a drow NPC running around, and to have the party directed at a later point to a former Matriarch of the drow. This essentially broke the ground rules of that part of the campaign down into four relatively easy to assimilate bites.

Inserting encounters and adventures of this type into the campaign structure quickly begins to fill the campaign time line out. Make sure characters have had the chance to find out

what they need to know to make valid choices at the critical points in the campaign.

### **5. Explanations**

It's also necessary to explain any key concepts and assumptions of the campaign, and better yet, to demonstrate them. You have to sketch in plot lines that clarify those parts of the background you obscured, reveals that which was hidden, exposes any lies, and so on.

In the case of the elves/drow example, it's necessary to make sure the party knows something devastating happened to the gods a century or so prior to the campaign starting, and the relationship between the gods and their worshippers - and its implications - be explained to the party. It's tempting to dump this into one or two big scenarios, with lots of exposition, but it's far better if you can divide it up into smaller pieces more easily absorbed.

When designing the campaign, it's acceptable to tell the players something "commonly believed" (but completely false), to tell them the educated believe something else (that completely misinterprets the truth), and to present a scenario that exposes the flaws in these world-views. That then leads to another scenario where the discrepancies are explained - and the second doesn't have to immediately follow the first (or vice versa).

Some of these scenario elements can be incorporated into the *Ground Rules* scenarios. Others can be saved for the *Transformation* scenarios, and some will have to be left to stand alone. The only rule of thumb is the characters deserve to understand the reasons things happen the way they do. If you don't offer explanations, there will come a time when they give up trying to understand the world, and stop interacting with it, and the campaign will start dying.

### 6. Cataclysms

There's no such thing as an epic adventure without cataclysms, disasters, calamities, setbacks, reversals, and other grim situations. These can be triggers for some of the scenarios, outcomes of some of the scenarios, and other epic conclusions.

As a rule of thumb, I like to have one every year to year-and-a-half of adventuring. These are the major staging points of the campaign, the end of one volume and the start of the next (to take an analogy from the world of fantasy novels).

In the drow/elves campaign world, for example, there were 5 "cataclysm" scenarios:

- The first one ended with the revelation that only 9 gods had survived the events of the background.
- The second told of a desperate race to get elvish relief for a city besieged by orcs in a winter campaign.

- The third dealt with the rescue of the elven Prince who had been captured by drow, and ended with the players redefining the balance of magic, religious power, and human vs. non-human civilization, while choosing a tenth god to complete the pantheon.
- The fourth revealed what the enemies of the gods had been up to over the last century and ended with Lolth claiming the elves.
- The fifth was the epic conclusion to the whole campaign - a civil war that turned the whole political and social background of the known world on its head and established why the PCs would be retiring at the end of it and what they would be doing hereafter, while giving the final pieces of explanation for mysteries revealed in the very first scenario.

## 7. Exit Clauses

By now, much of the campaign should be planned, at least in outline form. You should have some idea of:

1. How the PCs will learn the essential concepts and background.
2. What each character will bring to the campaign.
3. What you will need to use NPCs to highlight.

It should also be clear the campaign will run for several years!

It's unlikely the PC line-up will remain stable for that length of time. Players will leave and new players arrive. Characters will die or disappear. And any of this can happen at any time. It's a

## Campaign Creation Guide

rare campaign that doesn't have some roster shake-up within six sessions of play.

The referee needs to be ready for all of this by opening a file on each of them. Anytime a PC learns something the others don't know (but is essential to the campaign), it should be noted in their records. Anytime one gains possession of a Plot Device (usually a magic item, but it could be a map, a book that can't be translated, a scroll with some exotic spell on it...) the referee needs to make a note of it. Anytime there is a task the character is intended to eventually perform, or a role they need to play for the campaign to reach its epic conclusion, the referee needs to write it down in their file and then tick off these tasks as they are achieved.

With this file, should the character be killed or should the player leave - for whatever reason - the referee knows what he needs to replace the character. It gives a basis for rejecting a proposed new character, or for introducing a new NPC, or whatever else may be needed to follow the road map.

What's more, for each character, the referee should have a plan for writing that character out, should it become necessary because the player has left the group. That plan can be as simple as "NPC until they do X," or it can be as complicated as adding a whole new scenario to the plan so the other PCs get to learn the secrets the old character took with him. At all costs, avoid placing the campaign in a position

where an NPC has to make a vital decision upon which the campaign will turn!

Any time this sort of thing takes place it also presents the referee with an opportunity. Instead of trying to force-fit characters into predefined roles, try to integrate the characters with your plans, adding whatever uniqueness they present to the overall plan. Re-evaluate what you have established and what you have planned, and discard your assumptions. Try to arrange things so the campaign grows organically from the PCs and their choices and behaviour. Plot trains are never welcome.

### **8. Choices**

Choice is all important in roleplaying. It's the characters' choices that ultimately drive where the campaign will go and where it won't. Make sure the players can see the logical consequences of their choices taking place in the world around them. Remember though, the NPCs will make choices too based on the best information they have, as coloured by their personalities and world-view.

It's not going too far to say the entire concept of an epic campaign is built around the concept of choice. Will Frodo take up the one ring or will he sneak out of Rivendell late on the night before the council? Will Zumash simply take the treasure, or will he despoil the idol as well? Players will forgive just about anything the referee does, if it's a logical

consequence of a PC's decision. (The same is not true of an NPC's decision! Players give referees just so much room to manoeuvre before they feel their characters are being picked on.)

It's easy to make the obvious choices - good and evil, riches or glory, that sort of thing. The major choices in an epic campaign should be much harder. A choice between two evils. A choice between what's good for some but bad for others. A choice between the short term and the long term. The important choices should always be hard ones.

It's important to prepare the characters for the choices that are before them. The most obvious way is to have advocates for each alternative speak their mind. A less obvious one is to use analogy and metaphor and legend. An even more subtle variation is to have the characters actually encounter situations that are metaphors for the different choices.

Referees should always bear in mind the prejudices and limitations of their players when setting up these choices. A lot of players find it hard to shuck off 20th century notions of romance, justice, and civil rights. When these are taken into account, a hard choice can become no choice at all.

Remember, when faced with a hard and equal choice, the smallest difference can swing the balance one way or another, and that leaves even the best players vulnerable to cultural carryovers. It can be entertaining and educational (to the referee at least) to use these prejudices against the players,

but doing so is a risky move. A player can decide they simply can't get comfortable with the campaign and drop out.

I try to take the possible 21st century prejudices of the players into account when presenting them with a choice so the choices are evenly balanced if the character thinks with his player's predispositions. Then I award extra XP for roleplaying if the character makes the choice that is opposed by modern standards of conduct, thought, and morality.

At the same time, though, remember the principle purpose of the game is not to faithfully recreate in a game setting the horrors of a past age of barbarism. It is for a group of modern-day people to have fun, and a small amount of this sort of thing goes a very long way. If the players wanted a history lesson, they would be doing something else. (The same holds true for morality, philosophy, ethics, law, economics...just about anything, in fact. If you have to explain it, think carefully about using it.)

Before players are forced to make a choice, the referee has to choose to put them in a position where their choice will matter - and your choices are no less difficult than the ones you are asking of the player characters.

## 9. Character Developments

If you outlaw it, your players will insist on having it. I'm talking about feats, classes, races, spells, etc. They will want to know why and will find endless nice things to say about it. And the

more valid the reasons you offer (from your point of view), the more debate you invite.

The worst reason (that is, the one that will provoke the most backchat) is "game balance." The counter-argument most commonly thrown back at you is it's not unbalancing if both PCs and referees have access to it, and furthermore it's not unbalanced anyway.

The next worst reason is you want it that way because it fits the campaign you want to run. This will be reinterpreted to mean "I don't want it so you can't have it."

For example, I disliked the traditional use of clerics as hit point drip bottles, so I set things up in such a way that healing spells simply compressed time enough for the injury to heal as it would have naturally - it just happened a lot faster. That meant bones had to be set first (or they would heal crooked), healing caused an incapacitating wave of pain taking the character being healed out of combat for a round, wounds left scars, and so on. It's all reasonable. I could have taken it further and had characters roll against starving to death if too much time was compressed for them, for example. But the howls of protest from my players were unbelievable, and they literally moved heaven and earth (well, heaven anyway) to change the situation.

The best reason is one that involves campaign background, particularly if there is a pathway to achieving or obtaining whatever "it" is.

For example, one player wanted to be a BladeDancer - an alternate class from Dragon magazine or somesuch. The basic concept of the class fit the campaign world reasonably well. The only problem was the party had already been through a situation in which the BladeDancer class would have been the logical solution, and thus it had been established there weren't no such animal.

The solution: decide there had been such a class a long time ago, but they died out - and promise the character the opportunity to resurrect the profession. For that PC, it would be a prestige class. Thereafter, if they played their cards right, it would be available to all members of their race. This changed a lose-lose situation into a win-win.

And that brings me to the subject at hand - character development in an epic campaign. Because it runs for so long, it's a fair bet characters will have lots of levels of development. It's a certainty before the campaign concludes, at least one player will want to take a character class that simply doesn't fit the campaign world. If you, as referee, don't prepare for this situation, you are sure to be put in the situation of having an aggrieved player insisting, "But I wouldn't have taken those two levels of X," or "I would have done Y instead."

There are three things you need to do to be prepared for this to avoid hurt feelings and unexpected collisions.

### **1) Next Class Level**

Require players to state what their next class level is going to be at the time they complete the current one. That gives you time to review in advance what they want. Better yet, get them to give a rough development plan for the next half-dozen or so levels so you can seed the campaign with subplots and encounters that let them fill the requirements.

### **2) Be Prepared to Compromise**

If the player really wants something, do your best to make it possible for them to get it - eventually. Get them to help you. Is the problem with the mechanics of the class - some special ability it has, for example?

Then explain the problem and offer them the class with something else substituted. Get them to explain why they want that particular item, spell, or class.

Is it a problem with the textual description of the class not fitting the background? If so, rewrite it.

### **3) Horse Trade**

If the character's taking of class X will interfere with the next scenario, but you're perfectly willing for them to have it afterwards, tell them that. Offer to waive any game mechanic prohibitions that would prevent them taking it then (and come up with an in-play excuse for that to happen). Offer them a magic item the character will find useful. If you have to, come up with a deus ex machina that lets them convert the

level/item/spell they do take into the one they want when it will no longer disrupt everything.

Your campaign plan should make allowances for, and provide the requirements for, the development of the characters along the lines the players desire. It's hard to do that without knowing what it is they want.

### **10. Timing**

Timing is important in an epic campaign. There should be a discernible rhythm. When all is calm, events should plod along with ample time and flexibility for exploration and discovery. As events approach a climax, the pace should quicken.

But that's only the most obvious aspect of timing. In a campaign with so much character development, it can be hard to judge how fast characters will advance. And, if you're not careful, you can end up with party of 13th level characters romping through a fourth level scenario.

As characters advance, they gain in abilities - especially spellcasters - and these can throw your plans into a cocked hoop.

### **Sub-Versions**

It took a long time to devise a way to deal with this problem (and I've yet to actually put it into practice, so be warned). The idea is to take each of those scenario steps and work out three sub-versions of each. The first one is "as written." The second

one assumes characters are four levels higher than you expected and consists of a couple of quick notes on how to ramp up the scenario difficulty level to cope. The third does the same for two levels more plus any carried-over extra levels from previous scenarios.

For example, let's say scenario #1 should take the characters to fourth level, scenario #2 should get them to sixth level, and scenario #3 to tenth level.

- **Scenario 1a** would anticipate the characters coming out of it at 8th level. That means the second half will probably be affected.
- **Scenario 2a** would assume the characters started at 8th level and came out at  $6 + 4 = 10$ th level.
- **Scenario 3a** would assume the characters started at 10th level and will come out at 14th.
- **Scenario 1b** would anticipate the characters coming out at 6th level. That means spellcasters will have 3rd level spells for roughly the last third of the scenario.
- **Scenario 2b** would assume the characters started at 8th level (from 2a) and come out at  $8 + 2 + 2 = 12$ th level (not 6th!).
- **Scenario 3b** would assume the characters started at 12th level (from 2b) and emerge at  $12 + 4 + 2 = 18$ th level (the +4 is the 4 levels they are expected to get, the +2 is the two extra that come from a 'b' assumption).

After scenario 1, look at what levels the characters have achieved and start off from scenario 2 at that level. I will lay odds you'll end up using the 'b' plan!

### **Mini-Scenarios**

The third aspect of timing is to give the characters an opportunity to perceive the consequences of the choices they made as part of the climax to the previous scenario. Follow each major scenario with a mini-scenario that does nothing but expend time. Give rumours, innuendo, and reaction time to percolate through the community.

These mini-scenarios should be self-contained and hold little or nothing in the way of long-term significance. At best, they should lay the groundwork for a future major scenario. This not only gives everyone involved a chance to catch their breaths, it gives the players a chance to feel their players have achieved something, and gives them the chance to enjoy the fruits of victory (or suffer the agonies of defeat, as the case may be).

These mini-scenarios should also be factored into the planned character development of the PCs - they *will* get XP from them.

Timing is very important to an epic campaign.

### **II. Side Issues**

If everything in a campaign is relevant to the main plot, the campaign begins to constrict. Players will start to demand free time for their characters. It means nothing to make the time free and then just skip over it - you have to play the free time. Give the characters a chance to get into mischief every now and then.

The best way to make sure something happens of interest is with what I call microscenarios. They probably won't generate much in the way of XP. Often, they are a single encounter, plus the consequences.

A pickpocket gets caught and tries to appear innocent by planting the booty in a PC's pocket. A lay preacher tries to foretell doom and gloom in the town square. A barbarian gets drunk and knocks on the wrong door. A chicken escapes from its coop and a 500 GP reward is offered for its return. A beggar is given a copper piece by a PC and begins to follow him everywhere, seeming to recognise him no matter how he disguises himself. Think of something outrageous, and then let events proceed as far as they will, at their own pace. It not only helps integrate the characters with the game world, it's light entertainment for everyone.

You should also integrate some of these things into the main scenarios. An old rivalry between NPCs who haven't met in the PCs' presence before, for example. This helps add to the believability of the big scenarios as they start out just like

"everyday life" for the characters, and it helps with the pacing aspect of the campaign raised in point 10.

Think mundane - with a twist.

### **12. Unpredictability**

The last ingredient in an epic campaign is unpredictability. Immediately after a player predicts exactly what you were going to do, change it! The guy on the throne with the smarmy smile and the eye-patch, stroking the cat, is not the big villain - just the flunky. The real villain is the cat, which is actually a robotic extension for a supercomputer hidden in the throne. Maybe the guy with the cat is actually a good guy, and the mission the PCs thought they were on is not what it seemed.

Of course, once the players get used to this, they will start second-guessing that there's going to be a plot twist. Once you reach this point, it's no good going back to doing the obvious - it will just seem insipid and dull, and will disappoint the players even as it surprises them. So insert a plot twist somewhere else.

No-one likes to read a book that gives away the big surprise on the first page. In an ordinary, disconnected campaign, you can get away with the occasional spot of predictability, but in an epic campaign, the predictable does not merely weigh down a single scenario, it's a millstone around the neck of the whole campaign.

## Campaign Creation Guide



So, there you have it, everything you need to run a campaign that will keep your players talking for years afterward - perhaps even for as long as the campaign itself!

Good playing!

# 6 Tips For Starting & Planning A Campaign

By Johnn Four

## 1. Decide This Will Be Your Best Campaign Ever

Make a decision, quietly to yourself, this will be the best campaign you've ever game mastered. Though this might seem like a lofty goal, it will help keep you focused on what's most important when plot threads, NPCs, PCs, and all sorts of other things start running amok on you.

"The best campaign ever" almost always boils down to your players. If they think it's awesome, then it probably is for you too. Therefore, make all decisions with your players topmost in your mind:

### **What Will Give My Players the Most Enjoyment?**

Here are some potential factors:

- Rules, game system choice
- Genre
- Game world (many factors there)
- Choice of PCs
- Choice of stories and adventures
- Types and mix of encounters

### What is Best For My Players?

- Game frequency (once a month, *every month*, without fail is better than trying to go weekly with frequently cancelled sessions)
- Mood (i.e., maybe your players have stressful jobs and need a good tension reliever campaign, or perhaps they want a serious, realistic game where they can feel like masters of their own fates)
- Is what your players ask for different than what they want? (i.e., do they ask for the "same old" campaign just to make things easy on you when they really want something new and exciting?)

Another trap to avoid is to get so excited with your own ideas and plans you forget to consider how your players and their PCs will fit in.

For example, at the beginning of my last D&D campaign I had planned for the major villain to be Orcus, lord of the undead. However, after getting well into the first session I realized the characters had little in the way of anti-undead capabilities, and future PC progression as undead-hunters looked bleak. Though I was excited about my campaign plans, I changed them after the first story to better suit the characters. If I had been thinking earlier, I could have avoided the whole undead thread all together and created something better attuned to the PCs.

Also, by deciding your campaign will be the #1 of all time in your group's opinion you will find yourself looking at the big

picture between sessions, rather than focusing too much on the micro details. You will be less likely to fall into the trap of "not seeing the forest through the trees," and be more conscientious of making continuous mid-course corrections on a campaign level.

### **2. What Does *Campaign* Mean to You?**

Be clear to yourself what you mean by the word *campaign*, and how that impacts your planning and game play.

Here's my definition

*A series of interactive stories where the sum of the players' experience and enjoyment is greater than the sum of the individual stories' parts.*

Huh?

I borrowed this definition years ago from the word *gestalt*: a structure or pattern so integrated as to constitute a complete, functional *thing* with properties not derivable by just putting all its parts together. The players and you need to add some *magic*. ☺

The overall experience and fun of a campaign should be greater than if you just GM a bunch of stories. Five stories in a campaign should create something more special than telling five random stories using the same characters.

How does this wacky definition affect my planning? Well, a campaign should take long-term advantage of these types of things:

- Recurring NPCs
- Several minor villains and a master villain who is involved in most of the individual stories
- Foreshadowing and symbolism
- Character change, development, growth in terms of abilities, relationships, personalities, and possibly even beliefs
- Game world change and development
- An overall campaign goal the PCs develop and nurture

These are parts of my personal definition of what a campaign is. There are other definitions out there, probably better ones in fact, but because I'm clear on *a* definition, I can plan faster using my mental checklist of what should and should not be part of a campaign.

So, be clear on your own definition of what a campaign is, and be sure you don't miss any parts or aspects of it during planning and play.

### **3. When Do You Usually Face “The Wall”?**

Drawing from my personal experience, I find most of my campaigns start off quite well, falter in the middle, and almost never reach a (satisfying) conclusion. Therefore, just like

athletes who compare their current physical and mental limits to a wall that must be broken through, I'd say my wall appears at about a year - real time - into a campaign, when the PCs reach about mid-level or second tier.

Just discovering this is an important campaign planning step. So, figure out what your wall is, then plan on how you will breakthrough it this time around.

Example walls:

### Campaign

- **Beginning** => bad starts can disrupt entire campaigns
- **Middle** => the plot doldrums
- **End** => railroads hit dirt tracks or GM can't figure how to tie things up

### Player Characters

- **Weak** => early deaths, lack of bonding or purpose
- **Experienced** => power gamers make weaker PCs not fun to play, character concept gets boring
- **Powerful** => game becomes too easy, campaign changes in nature (e.g., exploration and combat game styles replaced with diplomacy and dilemmas)

### Story

- **Beginning** => boring or weak starts fail to engage group
- **Middle** => playing without purpose or reward

## Campaign Creation Guide

- **End** => PC action disrupt plans or options for climactic finales
- **Making transitions between stories** => disconnects with starting new adventures in campaigns loses momentum, kills continuity, or breaks immersion

### Game World

- **The world before the PCs' meddling** => poor or uninspired world building makes campaign planning difficult
- **The world during the PCs' meddling** => the world becomes brittle or stays static, causing campaign problems

### Real Life

- **Players move or change** => continuity suffers
- **The GM moves or changes** => vision or details for campaign are gone
- **Play less often** => momentum and interest dies

### Inspiration

- **GM loses interest or always wants to start something new** => players never experience other PC and campaign stages, or players get burned out on false starts
- **Players lose interest or always want to start something new** => GM tires of wasted prep or learning new games, players get cynical, or GM petrifies with same boring old tricks

- **Loss of interest in the characters** => not enough story integration, or mismatch between campaign concept and party make-up
- **Loss of interest in the stories** => poor storytelling or story elements repeated too often and become predictable
- **Loss of interest in the game world** => wrong mood, GM railroads, world lacks interesting details or remains static
- **Loss of interest in the game system** => burnout, mismatch with play style, or gameplay gets repetitive

Do any of these walls appear in your campaigns? If so, the question then becomes, what will you do differently this time around to break through? Perhaps it's simply a matter of perseverance. Or maybe more drastic changes are in order. Either way, consider all of this before you start your campaign to quit making the same mistakes over and over in your GMing career.

### 4. Avoid the Same Old Things

Gaming groups get into gaming ruts. Players make the same types of PCs, no matter the game system or setting. The GM comes up with the same villains, stories, or challenges every time. The same conversations, situations, and results repeat themselves.

**The bad news** => there's no story out there that you have not already told, watched or read. There's a finite number of themes and plots, and you've experienced them all.

**The good news** => fixing a rut is simple. The obvious tip is to try something new. But, I'd like to add another part to that tip: try something that's just 20% new.

Assuming you don't decide to go headlong into a whole new gaming system or genre (which would definitely help fix a rut), and you want to continue with the same players using your favourite game system or setting you've invested so much time in, you only need to change 20% of the same-old-stuff to make things different and exciting again.

20% is not a lot, but that's why it's so effective. The new stuff will stand out clearly from the rest, and everyone will focus on that and enjoy the new experiences. They can comfortably rely on the good old 80% that's still familiar, and have a blast with the new differences.

Also, 20% is a manageable change. You get to keep 80% of your old knowledge and experience while planning, and can focus on making the new stuff sizzle.

20% is the same as saying 2 out of 10. So, consider changing 2 out of the 10 sample roleplaying elements:

- PC skills
- PC classes
- PC races

## Campaign Creation Guide

- Villain or enemy goals or type
- Campaign setting terrain (i.e., try a desert or glacier game)
- Factions (start using them or change them up)
- PC equipment
- Rewards, treasure, magic items
- NPCs, relationships
- Nature of missions, jobs, quests, or adventures
- Technology

For example, you've just planned out your favourite kind of campaign: a medieval fantasy setting. The players have made a wizard, warrior, priest, and rogue. An evil necromancer is raising an undead army and has kidnapped the princess to be his bride. And the King's agents are combing inns and taverns throughout the realm looking for heroes brave (or stupid) enough to rescue his daughter.

You suddenly realize though, this is pretty much the same as your previous four campaigns. So, you decide to make a couple of changes:

- The evil necromancer and King have a powerful enemy in common who has just cast a curse upon the land so all worked metal turns to rust.
- You give all the PCs, as a bonus that you work into their backgrounds with their approval, an extremely high skill level in riding/trick riding on unusual mounts: giant cats.

Things are a bit different now, even though you've only changed a couple of things from the list above. With no metal, life has transformed dramatically for the realm's inhabitants - good and evil, PC and NPC. And with giant cats and a bunch of fancy riding tricks, the PCs are sure to play differently. You get new and interesting campaign options all around too!

### **5. Start With the End in Mind**

Great campaigns have exciting and memorable endings. Before you start playing, try to imagine the perfect ending for your campaign, even though it might be months or years down the road. What combination of events, situations, and confrontations would you like to see come together for a legendary finale?

Though you can't script such an ending because your players will do unexpected things during the course of play - it's an interactive game, after all - just by having an ideal ending in mind you'll be better able to *gently guide* things to an optimum conclusion.

That alone is worth spending a few minutes on before the start of a campaign. Dream up the ultimate ending. Then update your vision every few sessions, taking into account recent actions and events, to recalibrate your vision and stay an agile GM.

## 6. Build Up Your Plans In Stages

If you do all your campaign planning in one shot, you might be taking a big gamble with your time because you have done any reconnaissance. If you lay everything out and just show up to the session, then player choices and actions, or the reality of the situation, could render many of your plans useless and therefore become a costly waste of your limited time.

You are better off building your plans over time, in stages.

Here are a couple of example approaches:

### 1. Communicate & Iterate

You think, make some notes, and chat with your players. Then you think some more, add to your notes, and get the PCs created and in your hands. Then you study the PCs, think more, and make more notes. Finally, you create and run a short adventure, then assess game play before fully fleshing out your campaign plans.

### 2. Bottom Up

You outline or read-up on the game world, perhaps starting with a map. You zoom in on the local starting campaign area, and figure out many details. You give a brief introduction to your players, perhaps by phone or email, and get their thoughts. Then you fully flesh out the campaign area, and add extra, long-term details to the setting's more distant areas (and possibly future campaign locales). Finally, with a bit of the game world and a bunch of the campaign area fleshed out, you

## Campaign Creation Guide

can make decisions about the campaign's conflicts, how the PCs fit in, and what your first story will be.



No matter what your plans are at the beginning, you'll have to change or update them as the campaign proceeds. However, by taking a little extra time at the beginning to plan in stages instead of all at once, you will get a better long-term picture and can plan more accurately for the future. This means less initial planning goes to waste, and a more enjoyable campaign overall.

In addition, by looking at reasons why your past campaigns have stalled or failed, you can diagnose and stop you and your group from making the same campaign-killing mistakes twice.

# My Campaign Planning Cycle

By Johnn Four

My current recipe is very successful, based on years of trial and error and from facing a ton of time-theft from other parts of my life.

## Bi-Weekly Game Sessions

We play every other Thursday night, from 6:30 until 10:30. My players have families, jobs, friends, and other hobbies, so gaming every 14 days is a great compromise. (I say compromise because I could game master every day, if given the opportunity.) GMing daily would actually reduce my preparation needs!

Game mastering every other week lets me split my planning time into two phases: gathering ideas and thoughts, and design.

## Week 1: Gathering Ideas and Thoughts

The first week involves mulling over previous session events, NPCs, plots, the campaign arc, and the game world.

Unless the entire session was spent in a small cardboard box at the bottom of a lake, there will be consequences to character actions from the last session and earlier sessions. Even if, for some weird reason, the whole game was spent

hacking wandering monsters, that activity at the least would change the ecosystem in the region, providing fodder for new encounter and plot ideas.

Did the PCs change the attitude or behavior of any important NPCs? (Let's say death is a form of behavior change, lol.) Did they knock out the top layer of the food chain, the bottom layer, or any important layer in between? Did something new get introduced into the mix, such as a disease, powerful magic item, or important knowledge?

For a week I'll noodle over what the PCs have done and how that makes an impact. This is a great opportunity to do blue sky thinking about consequences, unshackled with having to make decisions or designs at this stage. This is a great time to introduce new elements just so they can react to the PCs, to loop in old elements for a surprise, or to connect two elements to stir things up. By element, I mean person, place, thing, event – any noun in your game.

Ray Bradbury said the most important part of writing fiction is the question *What if?* For anything that comes to mind about any aspect of the campaign while I'm driving, watching TV, doing email, I'll ask *What if? Why? So what?*

This self-interrogation is a great way to chew on ideas to see what sticks, what reveals holes, what needs more noodling. For a whole week, without any pressure, I'll just think and imagine the campaign, adventure, and game world. I let

everything slowly circle the bowl until week two comes around.

### **Week 2: Design**

By the time week two arrives I'll have several leading ideas. I will have thoughts burning away and many ideas jotted out on paper or in [my MyInfo organization system](#). It's time to create stuff for consumption in the next game session.

Design is one of my favourite parts of game mastering but it's easy to procrastinate. I'll get busy with other priority stuff or I'll come home tired and not feel creative. I'll have a newsletter to publish, or a family thing, or....a thousand excuses.

It's rare now that I get a large block of time I can either devote to design or last the entire way through without interruption or distraction.

My solution is to craft an encounter a day. Seven days, seven encounters. My sessions, on average, consume 4-5 pre-planned encounters (plus 4-6 ad hoc encounters in reaction to PC choices). So this gives me a buffer of two pre-planned encounters.

Sometimes I won't get to make seven, so I need to draw on my buffer. And sometimes I'll take an unused encounter created for a previous session and update it to fill my buffer even more.

Mike Bourke made a comment about just writing 1-3 lines for game elements until they are needed, and then he'll flesh them out in greater detail. This is an excellent tip. I'll have several encounter seeds like this written down by the end of week 2 as well. These will be for ideas whose time hasn't come yet, for encounters currently relevant but I've run out of design time, or for encounters given low priority because they weren't likely to trigger.

### **You Gotta Enjoy Campaign Design**

A final word. You need to enjoy creating stuff for your campaign. This is different than feeling lassitude or being too busy or frazzled to get into the right frame of mind for creation. If designing stuff is not your thing then this approach will not work for you. The second week will be hell and full of avoidance, guilt, and bad feelings because you are not doing something you set out for yourself to do. That path leads to burnout and eventual departure from game mastering.

So embrace the joy of campaign design. Figure out what you like about it, and focus on that. Use that interest as a strength. Set assign regular times between sessions to mull over the events of the previous session, and then start designing great game play possibilities for the next one.

Have more fun at every game!

# Been There, Done That, Doing It Again - The Sequel Campaign

By Mike Bourke, [campaignmastery.com](http://campaignmastery.com)

It happens to all GMs if they stay behind the screen long enough: a campaign comes to an end, and the players insist on a sequel. But the whole reason the campaign has come to an end is the GM has run out of ideas for the original campaign (or at least, out of ideas that were as good as the ones already used).

There are often good reasons to say no, or at least 'not yet' to such a request:

- The GM might want a change of pace, or might want to run a different game or genre for a while
- He might have a new idea he's been developing in the meantime
- Some players may be more enthusiastic about a sequel than others
- The GM may feel the ideas on which the original was founded have run their course
- The campaign may have reached the point where it feels more like work than recreation
- There may have just been a big finish that has left the GM feeling burnt-out

- He might be unsure about what made the first campaign so popular that a sequel is demanded in the first place – and so is not sure of what to keep and what to throw away

At the same time, there are some tremendous attractions. The GM has invested a great deal of time and energy on the background and NPCs of the existing campaign – being able to recycle some of that material into a new campaign obviously gives him more bang for his buck, more reward for his effort. Any props, maps, or game supplements bought specifically for the old campaign also get reused, increasing the gaming value for dollars invested. A lot of the work of a new campaign is already done.

On top of that, there will always be things the GM feels he could have done better, or that he got wrong. A sequel is a way to get that monkey off his back, and that can be a powerful inducement.

But sequel campaigns are scary propositions. There are a number of pitfalls. Let's discuss some of the worst ones.

### **Pre-Planned Potentials**

The first time a sequel is demanded can come as a shock to the GM. And it's an flattering compliment that makes him want to say yes, even if he has no ideas on tap for such a campaign. Then doubts set in. Was the campaign really that good? Or did it go through a painful initial awkwardness the players want to

avoid? Is it just that the players finally have the GM housetrained? Does the GM even have any ideas left that are any good?

After it's happened a time or two, though, you learn to anticipate the possibility. Throughout the course of a campaign, I'm thinking about the campaign that will follow, and storing ideas for it. I will often deliberately pre-plan the potential for a sequel into my campaigns from word one, which can make the process of implementing such a sequel a much happier one.

### **The First Decision**

Whether you have done so or not, when you are faced with the question, you have three immediate choices: To say yes, to say no, or to say eventually.

It's easy to say yes when you've already prepared for the possibility, and don't feel like you need a change of pace.

It's easy to say *eventually* if you have the sense of a campaign idea but it needs more development, or if you want to actually have a brief change of pace while working on the sequel campaign – and that at least keeps the gaming group going in the meantime, even if all you do for six months is play board games.

It's very hard to say no in the face of player demands for more, but sometimes it is the right decision.

Before you can make a proper decision, you need to consider the major potential pitfalls.

### **Lightning in a Bottle**

For any campaign to run its course and reach its conclusion, ending with a bang rather than with a whimper, it must have had some magic in the alchemy that went into its life. Running a sequel is rather like trying to capture lightning in a bottle. It's possible (you need a leyden jar and a kite) but in other words, you need some specific preparation.

Knowing what preparations you need to be make depends on knowing what it is you are trying to capture. Exactly what was it players enjoyed so much they want more of?

- Was it the game setting?
- Was it some of the NPCs, or the style of the adventures?
- Are there unresolved questions they want answered?
- Do they want to know what happens next – was it the plot?
- Was it the way their characters became entwined in the plot?

Only if you can identify the particular brand of lightning you captured the first time around can you know what the sequel must keep – and what can be thrown away and replaced with something new.

## **‘Been There Done That’ Syndrome**

Keeping the wrong things can lead to the new campaign feeling old and stale right from the beginning – “Been There, Done That.” The worst mistake a GM can make in preparing a sequel is to make it exactly the same as the successful campaign. Even new characters aren’t necessarily enough novelty value to keep a campaign sequel functioning. Only if you are sure that this won’t be a problem should your answer be a ‘yes’ or ‘eventually’. Later, I’ll offer some specific techniques for avoiding this, but the bottom line remains – know what cards to keep in your hand and what to throw away.

## **Player Expectations (In General)**

A key issue is the general question of player expectations. The sequel campaign will have to be bigger and better in all the areas that made the precursor campaign shine so brightly, but that’s not enough.

### **Star Wars I-III**

For proof of that statement, all that needs be done is contemplate the reception of the second Star Wars trilogy. With the exception of the unmitigated loathing felt by many for the character of Jar-Jar Binks (that I’ll discuss separately in a moment), there were a number of other problems with this trilogy. Little things like the so-called “prophecy of the one who will bring balance to the force” that were never explained,

and were then totally ignored. The whole transition from movie #2 to #3, and especially the ease with which the big bad villain of the intervening animated series was dispatched, showed inconsistent power levels. But, there were arguably as many holes in the older trilogy (though they were less prominent). No, the real problem with the trilogy is it failed to satisfy the expectations of the audience.

That was an inevitable risk, because Lucas had a choice: to tell the predictable story, or to try and keep the plot at least a little surprising. The prequels nature of these movies was a handicap, and overcoming that resulted in a lesser story than what might have been. I don't find the movies as bad as most people seem to think – ignoring the irritation factor of specific characters and overlooking the plot holes and inconsistencies. They are as good as *The Empire Strikes Back* in my opinion, and I didn't expect them to be any more than that due to the problems inherent in everyone already knowing the basic plot in the first place.

### **The Necessity Of Jar-Jar Binks**

By far the biggest criticism of the trilogy, and one with which I agree, is the incredibly annoying character of Jar-Jar Binks. And it was all about the offensive and demeaning vocal characterization.

But what all the criticism of Jar-Jar fails to mention is the necessity of a character to fill that role, specifically someone well-meaning but manipulable and yet part of the inner circle.

The leading characters couldn't do it, they had to be too heroic to be the tools of the true villain. The entire first movie is about getting Jar-Jar into that central position, the entire second movie is about setting up the (poorly-explained) conspiracy with (unknown to anyone) the same person playing both sides against the other. And the third movie is about the transition from Anakin to Darth Vader and the ultimate delivery of power to the true villain by the foolish Jar-Jar.

The biggest problem of all with Jar-Jar is he is absolutely essential to the plot. And knowing this, it becomes even less comprehensible how none of the people working on the film could fail to realize just how annoying the characterization was going to be. I am absolutely convinced if they had told Ahmed Best to use any other accent, Jar-Jar would have been funnier - and far more acceptable.

All this is relevant to the question of sequels in general. Certain characters, events, or plot devices may be absolutely essential to explaining the transition from old campaign to new. But if those characters are too annoying and distasteful it can contaminate the entire sequel. Taking an especially beloved character and 'ruining' them can have the same effect.

## **The Psychology of the Sequel**

Many of these issues are inherent in the nature of a sequel. And they all boil down, in the final analysis, to player

expectations and what players want in a sequel. Deliver that core and the rest is yours to play with as you see fit.

### **Star Trek V: The Final Frontier**

The more players in a campaign, the more likely it is some will have differing expectations and desires of a sequel campaign. Satisfying all of them leaves the sequel as an insipid copy of the original. The mere fact you have more people to satisfy leads to compromise, and each compromise sucks some of the vitality from the ensuing sequel. This is one of the ongoing complaints about the Hollywood Studio system.

An excellent example is the story of Star Trek V, as recounted in [‘Captain’s Log: William Shatner’s Personal Account of the making of Star Trek V: The Final Frontier’](#). This movie started out as an interesting premise, but was eviscerated by studio demands and rewrites and budgetary limits until it was a morbidly-decaying corpse of a plot. The philosophical issues raised by the original plotline were deemed too controversial, for example, completely ignoring the fact Star Trek had tackled the core issue a number of times. It might never have made a great movie, but it would have made a good one – instead of being the worst of the entire franchise (and I include Star Trek The Motion Picture).

The mistake made here was in trying to salvage parts of the plot after the original premise was ripped from it, and would have proved far too expensive anyway. It would have been better to start afresh with a new idea than to proceed with a

half-baked and shallow copy of the original plot. (These days, with CGI, the original could probably be made – but would still have been too controversial for the studio, but that’s a different argument.)

### **Sequels Are Hard**

There is an expectation amongst GMs and players alike a sequel campaign will be easier to create than an original, and to some extent there is a certain validity to that statement. Some past creativity can be recycled, so the workload in those areas is reduced. What few people take into account is what’s left is a LOT harder than it usually is. When the necessary effort is put in, however, the sequel can be greater than the sum of its parts.

I make the above statement not to discourage GMs from creating sequels in response to player demand, but to inject a little realism into the expectations of both sides of the GM screen. Don’t expect it to take only a few weeks – it will usually take as long as creating a new campaign from scratch would have taken, if not longer. The best approach is to start working on nuts and bolts for a sequel campaign (if there is going to be one) as soon as play begins in the precursor campaign – and to develop the two in parallel. The ideas can always be recycled if no sequel campaign manifests.

## Something Borrowed, Something New

So much for generalities. Let's now move on to the heart of the topic – how to escape and avoid these pitfalls. I'll assume you already have some idea of what your players enjoyed most about the old campaign – enough to request the sequel in the first place – and what elements are free to be reinvented as necessary.

## Campaign Seeds

History has a continuity that makes it different to fictional stories. Organizations may be dead, broken, or scattered – or simply bereft of leadership. Their original purpose may no longer be fulfillable, but their ambitions (in general terms) will continue. Political factions won't go away, and ideas are even more pernicious.

So the place to start planning a sequel campaign is always to sketch in a rough outline of:

1. Who and what are left after the big finish to the old campaign
2. How those groups might react to the changed circumstances following that climactic conclusion

If you have five organizations left over, devising a plan for each to achieve their original goals, or something equivalent, gives you an excellent foundation. Since there is no action without a reaction, even in writing, these groups will be opposed by

others for various reasons. And if they have no opposition left, one will immediately start to gestate.

Another thing to note before you begin is exactly what the PCs – and players – expected would be the washup from their final battle in the precursor campaign. While deviations from this should be expected by the players and intended by the GM, it remains the starting point. Remember, the road to Hell is paved with good intentions!

There are some specifics to dig out and throw into the idea heap for a sequel campaign. These are the seeds from which the new campaign will grow, so let's look at each of them in some detail.

### **Accumulated Unused Plot Ideas**

Every GM accumulates plot ideas that don't fit their current campaign for one reason or another. A good example of that is shown by Johnn's article at Campaign Mastery a few years ago, [Undead Are Taking Over...What Happens?](#) and my reply, [The Undead Are Coming!](#)

Some people just forget these. Other, wiser, heads put them in writing. Who knows when they might need an idea? They are all grist for the mill in a new campaign, especially any that derive from the precursor campaign!

### **Leftover Plotlines**

Almost every campaign also accumulates its share of leftover plotlines that were never wrapped up. It's easy to get diverted.

Like a snowball rolling downhill, these – no matter how minor they were at the time – can become major elements of the new campaign.

### **Leftover NPCs of Importance**

Significant NPCs who survive the finale of the precursor campaign will continue to hold the same basic ambitions, modified as necessary to take the finale events into account. This can be especially important if the finale leaves any sort of power vacuum, as is often the case.

And that brings me to:

### **Leftover Politics**

Politics is usually larger than any one person. Once hostilities break out, for example, the death of the architect is usually not enough to restore peace. At best it may make peace possible. Whatever political forces were at play will either be continued by the successors of those who were lost in the precursor campaign or will be usurped by opportunists. With additional time – and the question of how large an interval in game time there should be between campaigns is something I'll address soon – some of these political imperatives will change, some will become muted or reduced in priority, and a few will be achieved, rendered impossible, or made irrelevant – and new ones will rise to take their place.

### **Backup Plans**

Arch-villains rarely have just one plan up their sleeves. Even if the villain is apparently killed in the finale, one of his flunkies or aides can always step forward, usurp the title, and claim his predecessor's backup plans as his own. And that totally ignores the possibility of someone figuring a clever way of surviving. So far as new PCs are concerned, they would not necessarily even know there had been a change – at best, one of the villain's plans was stopped by some adventurers making the ultimate sacrifice – or the ultimate mistake.

Exceptionally clever villains may even have anticipated the success of the PCs in the precursor campaign, even their own destruction in a final confrontation, and laid plans accordingly, for their own return. I used that trick for both the second and the third Superhero campaigns in my Champions universe, with a villain who simply would not stay dead!

### **Player Expectations (Specific)**

The best way to avoid the “Been There, Done That” problem is to assume ‘the perfect solution to all the world's problems’ that ended the previous campaign is neither perfect nor the solution to all the world's problems. At the time, everyone (including perhaps you) was seeing it through rose-colored glasses, and it was the best approach they could find at the time. If you can reach the point where you are thinking “if the PCs only knew [x] at the time, they would have done [y] differently” in the prior campaign, then you have the foundations of a sequel. [x] might be something already in

existence, or something someone would do to try and take advantage of the situation during or after the big finish.

A key principle is “it is possible for men of good conscience to disagree honestly.” In politics, it’s easy to become cynical. Never forget there are going to be some on the other side who are sincere in their beliefs that [z] is the right thing to do, the best thing to do, and they may have a point, no matter how much your own, equally sincere belief may be [z] is the worst possible thing to do. Everything that went into the decision-making of the PCs at the conclusion of the progenitor campaign should be picked apart and viewed with suspicion. Is there an assumption that can be twisted to the ends of a new plotline?

### **New Ideas**

As you compile lists of these raw ideas, new ones will inevitably come to you. Add them to the list!

### **Allocated Plotlines**

I will pre-allocate a number of plotlines from the outset. Substitutions are permitted, but these are blank spaces each of which I strive to keep filled until play commences.

Sometimes these allocated ideas are not big enough to sustain an entire adventure. When that happens, I look for themes, or associated subjects in common, or simply ways to take two small ideas and meld them into one large idea.

## **A Plotline For Each Type of PC**

Every campaign and genre has its own set of archetypes. In Pulp, it can be detectives and mad scientists and secret agents. In superheroes, there are Psionics and Martial Artists and Energy Protectors and Bricks and Detectives. 3.x has its character classes. Star Trek has its bridge stations and the specialists who work at them.

Then there are the questions of races. Once I have the foundations of the campaign and a list of ideas with which to populate it, I start by deliberately choosing ideas each of which will feature one type of PC. Either the players will have someone upon whom that plotline will focus amongst their number, or they will have to find a way to handle a problem for which none of them is really suited – either makes a good start to a campaign structure.

## **A Plotline For Each Specific PC**

Once the players start generating characters (if they have to), I also like to ensure there is at least one plotline for each PC. These go beyond race and class and focus on the individual and his or her circumstances. This is an excellent tool for making each of them feel part of the campaign.

## **A Plotline For Each Player**

And, if I know them well enough, I like to have one specific plotline targeting each of the players, if there isn't one already. The common thread might be plotlines each player will especially enjoy, or plotlines that target a weakness or blind

spot of the player, or that simply revolves around a subject of interest to each player.

### **Campaign Seeds**

So you have a list of ideas, and the foundations of a campaign, and some initial thoughts about possible plotlines, but they aren't a new campaign yet. These are Campaign Seeds, rather like adventure seeds but with a broader scope. Nurturing these seeds and growing them into a full campaign is the next stage in the process....

### **Sprouts and Saplings**

If you've followed the advice so far, your proposed sequel campaign is now brimming with ideas, but they are scattered and incomplete. Some of these campaign seeds will flower and bloom, others will wither and lie dormant and unused. They are not yet part of a campaign. Culling, compiling and hammering them into a unified shape is necessary before the campaign can be made ready for play.

### **Big Pictures**

The place to start is with some major decisions. Because there are quite a lot of items to consider in this context and at this time, I've subdivided these decisions into four subcategories:

- Big Picture Decisions

- Theme Decisions
- Interval Decisions
- Campaign Structure Decisions

Some of these will come naturally and immediately to the GM, others may require considerable contemplation.

### **Meeting Expectations**

The key to making these broad general decisions is knowing what the players expect from the campaign. In general, there are three ways of handling those expectations, and as a general rule you will want to employ all three. The first way of handling expectations is to meet them.

There are going to be some expectations on the part of the players you want to satisfy, hands down. For one thing, you don't want to marginalize the achievements of the precursor campaign. The sequel is going to be all about consequences and reactions to consequences.

You also won't want to make any major changes to the style of GMing you employed in the first campaign, so the campaign structure will be largely similar.

Favorite NPCs, especially the ones the players love to hate, shouldn't be changed. So many of the key components of the campaign are fixed.

### **Inverting Expectations**

At the same time, there are some expectations players may have that you will want to turn on their heads. In particular, any notions they may have that:

- The previous campaign solved all the world's problems
- An evil figure will have somehow become an angel following the defeat of his plans
- Allies and friends will be steadfast
- Previous relationships with NPCs will survive intact. Friends fall out and drift apart all the time. People make well-meaning mistakes all the time.
- Former enemies might be revealed in the course of the new campaign as having good reasons for what they did, and may become allies – especially if social or political circumstances within the campaign change.
- Some characters do reform, or attempt to reform.

My rule of thumb is for characters to always be true to themselves. If they are villains, there is a good reason for that behavior – even if it's just that they are evil! The better you understand who your NPCs are – or, in this case, were – and how they think, and why, the more easily you can interpret who they will be and what they will do under the changed conditions following the precursor campaign.

### **Twisting Expectations**

A favorite technique is to take a couple of selected expectations the players hold and twist them. This comes under the general heading of “Be careful what you wish for.” This takes an expectation, especially one that’s outcome- or consequence-related, and appears to satisfy it while delivering a wholly unexpected and undesirable / desirable outcome. In *The Hobbit*, Gandalf and his allies drive the Necromancer from his lurking place in Mirkwood only for him to stand revealed in *The Lord Of The Rings* as Sauron, and more dangerous than ever.

### **Managing Expectations**

One of the most valuable tools you have in your arsenal is the reminiscing session. Get your players together after the campaign for a post-campaign party. Play games, eat, drink, be merry – and above all, reminisce. If there’s a revelation or two about the previous campaign you can finally reveal (even if it makes you look a little foolish), do so. Then listen to what the players have to say very carefully. The conversation will tell you volumes about their expectations of the sequel.

To some extent, players will be unsurprised things have gone to hell in a hand basket since the preceding campaign. They will expect you to twist and manipulate events to create the scope for a new adventure. So you have a certain latitude.

Above all, if the new campaign is to invert or twist expectations of the precursor campaigns’ outcome, part of the

new campaign must be the reforming of that outcome. If the players can see the potential for this, they will forgive and accept an awful lot.

There are some expectations you want to encourage, if you can possibly deliver on them. Insights into what happened in the preceding campaign are a good thing to promise. Try not to encourage the expectation the new campaign will be “bigger and better” – or even that it will be “flashier” or “grittier.” You can probably promise an interesting plot twist or two, since every good GM throws these in as a matter of course.

### **Historical Foundations**

One useful technique for throwing the big picture into perspective is to sum up the previous campaign as analogous to a historical period, then look at what came next. You might decide the most appropriate analogy is between Imperial Rome at its height, for example – in which case, the sequel campaign should have a theme of increasing decadence and corruption, “barbarian” incursions, and decline preparatory to the fall of the Empire.

There are two ways you could play such a campaign theme:

- The PCs are going to be the key to reinvigorating the Empire
- The PCs are going to ultimately become its executioners, a mercy killing after it has undermined and abrogated every principle that made it worthwhile.

Of course, the “invading barbarians” don’t have to be from a well-established neighboring kingdom or rival empire. They could be from another plane of existence!

These progressions seem “natural” when they are encountered. They are inherently recognized as plausible and believable.

### **A Plurality of Civilizations**

It’s always fun to have several different civilizations at different stages within their evolutionary cycle. If the elves were learned and wise and socially or politically strong in the previous campaign, perhaps they have slipped into decadence – just as the orcish civilization is starting to emerge from the tribal stage and forming city-states, and the human kingdoms are beginning to dream of empire.

I’m a big fan of the concept that organizational structural change becomes inevitable through growth and efficiency demands. The first Fumanor Campaign was all about recovering from the apocalypse that took place a century earlier in the campaign background and discovering the true cause of the collapse of the old Empire. In the course of the second, the Kingdom of Fumanor (for which the campaigns are named) had grown too large for effective administration from a central position. It was being held together by baling wire and good intentions and not much more. On their estates, the nobility was more or less independent and the situation was ripe for civil war.

That war was the big finish to that campaign, and its outcome dramatically increased the size of the Kingdom beyond any hope of central administration. It is falling apart at the seams in the third and fourth campaigns. One of those campaigns focuses on the never-ending task of putting out increasingly-damaging forest fires in the dynamite factory, holding the Kingdom together despite the inevitability of it flying apart - while the other is dealing with the confrontation with an empire that emerged from the apocalypse more powerful than it had been previously and has since slipped into decadence. Ultimately, both campaigns (and they started off as a single campaign) are about the growing pains as the Kingdom Of Fumanor becomes the Fumanorian Empire - or collapses into warring city-states and a new age of barbarism.

### **Golden Ages Make Dull Settings**

As a general rule, Golden Ages are dull. There's not enough internal division to make a political campaign interesting, there's no external threat big enough to threaten them. Expansion is both easy and inevitable. The average citizen can live out a life of moderate prosperity and never be endangered. If the outcome of the prior campaign was an expected new golden age - or even a promised one, if the GM got carried away with his flavor text at the wrap-up - either the sequel campaign is in trouble or the GM is definitely going to have to undermine that rosy promise. Systemic political and social flaws must be uncovered and brought to light, new

threats must appear from the outside and internally, and in general, there's got to be trouble afoot.

### **Counterpoint**

That's not to say there can't be a fun campaign set within a golden age if the GM is creative enough. It will simply be radically different to the preceding one. An age of exploration and discovery and progress, an era of prosperity and opportunity and civil liberties, can carry the seeds of its own inherent demise. Human flaws and failings and ambitions won't have changed all that much. Some people will feel threatened by the prosperity of group X, some people will see the opportunity for personal gains beyond the general, and there's always the potential of an even bigger enemy on the outside, or even simply an evenly matched rival that's come out of nowhere. There's still plenty of scope for adventure – don't let the difficulty put you off. It's going to be a harder campaign to run than if everything was falling apart, but in part that's because it's an unusual setting – and uniqueness of campaign is always good.

### **Themes**

Having nailed the general concepts of the background of the new campaign, and how it is going to differ from both the expectations of the players and from the old campaign, it's time to think about themes for the new campaign.

In this context, **a theme is an element or transition of style or content that will recur throughout the campaign.** It can usually be summed up in a relatively pithy and very brief statement:

- “All things must pass”
- “Some things are inevitable”
- “The road to Hell is paved with good intentions”
- “One man can make a difference”
- “We’re all more than the sum of our parts”
- “There are things man is not meant to know”
- “Evil cannot help itself”
- “All men carry the seeds of their own destruction within”
- “Into every life a little rain must fall”
- “Death is a dangerous business”
- “Winter always follows a summer”
- “Be careful what you wish for”
- “Anarchy is its own reward”
- “Individualism is solitary”
- “Even a fool can be wise after the fact”
- “No-one in Babylon-5 is exactly who he or she appears to be”

Think of them as taglines that sum up all or a significant part of the campaign – or, in this case, are intended to. As game play proceeds, the interaction between plot and player, between PC and environment, will generate new themes, some of which may supplant the themes the GM initially had in mind.

For example, my current Zenith-3 campaign has fourteen themes (and there may be more I'm not going to reveal here):

- To be a hero one must do heroic things. Even if no-one is watching.
- A villain is someone who does villainous things. No matter what their reputation or intent.
- Black & White morality can be fuzzy around the edges.
- For part to be saved, sometimes part must be lost. But who decides which part is which?
- Everything you thought you knew is wrong – except the parts that aren't. Twists and turns await.
- Perspective or insight can be more valuable than expertise.
- Technology can be useful or user-friendly; it's rarely both at the same time.
- There's more than one way to skin a cat.
- Nothing is forever, and the more permanent it seems the more suddenly it can be swept away.
- We are all flawed. Sometimes those flaws can destroy us.
- Inevitability says nothing about duration.

## Campaign Creation Guide

- There are more things in heaven and earth than exist in ANYone's philosophy.
- All victories have a price.
- A team is more than the sum of its parts and no stronger than its weakest link.

Virtually every adventure of significance in the campaign will play into one or more of those themes. The planned big finish to the campaign will involve almost all of them.

There are at least seven types of theme. There may well be more, but these were all I could think of when planning this article.

### **Social & Political Themes**

Social and political themes deal with relationships in general, and how people interact within those relationships. Things people agree on, things they don't, and the confrontations that result. A sub-theme of one of my current Fumanor campaigns is the emergence of the orcs as a politically- and socially-progressive influence. Yes, you read that right.

### **Mystic Themes**

If the supernatural is going to play any part in your campaign, you should tie it to one or more Mystic Themes.

### **Cosmological Themes**

Some campaigns have cosmological themes, indicating that "what's out there" is significant. A common theme to all the Fumanor Campaigns is "Order vs. Chaos". One of the themes

of the Shards of Divinity campaign is “Creativity comes from God.”

### **Emotional Themes**

Many themes will be emotional in nature, dealing with the relationship between individuals. “We are all flawed. Sometimes those flaws can destroy us” is definitely emotional in nature.

### **Tonal Themes**

Sometimes a theme is simply a common emotional connection. “Hope is eternal”, “Sadness is inevitable”, “We all do things we regret”, and “Despair is self-defeating” are examples.

### **Philosophical Themes**

By far the majority of themes will be philosophical in nature. You don’t have to look hard through the list of revealed themes from the Zenith-3 to see the truth of this fact.

### **Conceptual Themes**

Finally, there are conceptual themes. These encapsulate a big idea that will be explored at length within the campaign. I often use these conceptual themes as the basis of a campaign’s title – “Seeds Of Empire”, “One Faith”, “Shards Of Divinity”, “The Tree Of Life” being a handful of examples.

## How Big an Interval?

The third of the big decisions is how large an interval will separate the sequel from the precursor campaign. There are essentially five options, and each have their own strengths and weaknesses, advantages and flaws. NB: I'm excluding prequels and other such variations from consideration here. The topic is already quite big enough, thank you!

### Retrograde Beginnings

The least common of the five is the Retrograde Beginning, where the new campaign starts prior to the conclusion of the precursor campaign, overlapping with it. This permits the establishment of characters prior to the in-game spotlight landing on them, permits the exploration of a different aspect of the big conclusion of the precursor campaign, and emphasizes the continuity between the two. Setting the new campaign in a location close to, but not part of, the big finish locale – so the new PCs can look upon their old character's achievements from a distance – is also useful. Another benefit is little work is needed on the campaign background, because the entire precursor campaign IS the background. And finally, the overlap pretty much guarantees the new campaign will get started with a bang!

If you choose this interval, be sure and make it work for you. Take advantage of this temporal setting, or you will find yourself saddled with the flaws without receiving any real benefit in compensation.

Those flaws: the new PCs may try to get involved in events ‘settled’ in the prior campaign. The players will be put under additional pressure concerning player knowledge vs. character knowledge. There won’t be time for new seeds and plotlines to sprout unless these are also inserted retroactively into the old campaign.

All of which makes this type of campaign harder to set up and to GM in its early stages, which no doubt is the reason why it is so uncommon.

The more leftovers from the old campaign you have, especially in terms of unresolved plotlines and unused adventures, the more useful this approach is. But there is one final caveat – why did the old campaign wrap up? If it was for any of several possible reasons, including having grown too complicated and unwieldy, you may find those problems perpetuated into the new campaign from day one.

### **Immediate Commencement**

Pretty much all of the above also holds true for the second time-interval option: starting the sequel campaign the day after the previous one wrapped up. It avoids or mitigates some of the flaws, but also fails to take full advantage of the benefits. In many ways, it’s a “nothing” solution. It’s much harder to surprise the players under this arrangement – the foundations of the campaign will be too well known. There are times when this is the right way to go. I chose this approach for the interval between the Zenith-3 campaigns, because several of

the characters were crossing over from one campaign to the next, and because there was a radical change of location involved.

### **Near-Term Commencement**

A better choice is to set the new campaign in the near-term but definitely after the conclusion of the previous campaign. That means the GM has to fill in the blanks of what's happened in the meantime, but this gives him the chance to “clean house” and write out plotlines that were becoming counter-productive. The big advantage of this approach is it gives the GM a little elbow room and a cleaner sheet of paper at the start of the new campaign. But it's somewhat more work to set up than either of the preceding campaigns.

There is a sub-question, of course: what exactly is the “near-term?” Generally, it can be measured in months, and it is certainly less than 2 years, but that covers a lot of ground.

### **Years Later**

There are some definite advantages to having even more elbow room. This weakens the bonds between the campaigns substantially, giving the new campaign a life of its own. That makes it harder to reuse props and maps from the old campaign, but also means the GM has had time for new seeds to be planted in consequence of the old campaign that have now sprouted into whole new plotlines.

### **Generations Later**

This is so far removed from the precursor campaign the two have little in common. That can be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on your perspective. I once designed a campaign using this interval that was all about the dark and dirty little secrets of the intervening years and the price the then-rulers made with ‘Ye forces of Darknesse’ for the last 300 years of peace. Never got to run it and the notes are now long lost. What those rulers didn’t know was the PCs in the preceding campaign had locked ‘Ye Forces Of Darknesse’ away until certain things occurred so the place was safe from the Vile Horrors for that period of time. Nor did they realize the price (in citizens to be handed over to the Evils) was gradually fulfilling the conditions of releasing the Evil Lying Horrors.

The example works because it leverages the timeline – the fact it is generations after the original campaign is an important plot point. And that’s the key to all these big decisions: make an informed decision after considering the alternatives and then put it to work for you.

### **Overarching Plotlines**

The last of the big decisions is one that’s relatively easy to make, because you made it for the precursor campaign and probably don’t want to change it. That decision is whether or not to have overarching plotlines that extend from the beginning of the campaign to the end. My style is very narrative and plot oriented, so I usually answer ‘yes’ to this.

Others prefer a less structured approach where things don't happen until the PCs get involved with them.

Like most big decisions, both have their advantages and their drawbacks, and there is also some middle ground to explore.

### **Yes - Campaign Length Plotlines**

In the 'yes' case, the goal is to turn all your campaign ideas into a series or list of events that are going to occur around the PCs, who can then choose to get involved in them – or not. If they take too long to resolve something, another problem rears up to further complicate their lives. One plotline leads to another, or sets up circumstances in which another plotline becomes more significant than it otherwise would be.

Railroading is the big danger here. It takes more work in advance, but at the same time adventures are faster to write because they always have a context and a direction. The campaign can be likened to a road map for the campaign, in which the GM is going to wash out certain bridges and cut certain roads and might even have set one or more intermediate destinations – but the actual navigation is up to the players. Because the GM is setting the destinations, his campaign structure need only concern itself with the dual alternatives of whether or not the PCs find a way to reach that destination. Everything else is contained within the individual adventure.

### **No - Campaign Length Plotlines**

In the 'no' case, plotlines don't exist until a PC interacts with them by going to a certain place or talking to a certain individual or making a certain decision. The GM never develops any plotline beyond the basic concept until it becomes clear this plot idea will be part of the next session of play.

This is less work in advance (but more work for each session), is a lot more flexible, but runs the risk of feeling static. From time to time, a GM can be caught out when the players unexpectedly zig instead of zag and shoot off in a completely unexpected direction for which the GM has no plotlines on standby.

### **And Indifferent**

There's an intermediate position in which there are some overriding general plotlines, general directions that everything is going in, but within which the individual plot ideas are left undeveloped until needed. The notion is the general direction will provide an interpretive context for the plot idea at the time the plot idea gets used, so it automatically updates the plot idea as necessary.

To be honest, I find this approach to be half-baked and more work. It also has more potential for leading yourself up a blind alley. But some people swear by it.

### **The Random Element**

In all three cases, it should never be forgotten that PCs are wild animals, untamed and unpredictable, capable of licking the palm of your hand one minute and ripping the head off your campaign the next – sometimes for no better reason than “because they can.”

No matter how carefully planned, the PCs will do something unexpected – sometimes brilliant, and sometimes crazy; sometimes insignificant and sometimes critically important. The more rigid your planning, the more vulnerable to the Wild Card your campaign becomes.

With that vulnerability comes the fact that everything listed in the campaign plan is there for a reason, and if you carefully noted the reason at the time, you can fill in the blanks and get the campaign back on track in a short time. You might be more vulnerable to the unexpected, but you can recover easier.

In contrast, the GMs without a master plan can be left floundering when their minds come up blank. They bet the farm on their ability to improvise a plot development no matter what the PCs did, and their bluff has been called. It happens less often, but when it does it's severe and can even bring the entire campaign crashing down.

And the GMs with a vague master plan but no concrete details planned in advance? They are somewhere in between. The PCs

will always constitute a random element to be taken into account.

### **Making Allowances**

I solve this problem by making allowances. While the high points of the next adventure may have been written down months or even years in advance, it's the current situation as defined by the past decisions and actions of the players that place the internal details in context. By always framing the adventures from the point of view of what the NPCs involved are doing, I have the freedom to let the players tell me what the PCs are doing.

The advice presented below is relevant regardless of campaign structure you choose, though some structures might require additional steps in the creation process. It will be obvious which ones those are, and when they don't apply.

### **Campaign Phasing**

No campaign is ever the same all the way through – unless it ends prematurely. Instead, campaigns can be subdivided into phases or stages. The larger and more complicated the campaign, the more stages it will have. If a campaign is considered to be one long story, phases are the equivalents of volumes within that multivolume plotline.

When I'm planning a campaign, and especially when I'm planning a sequel campaign, I carefully plan out the phases of the campaign.

### **Logical Phasing**

Logical Phasing distinguishes between parts of the campaign based on in-game events and locations. If the campaign is about the founding of a new nation, on a newly-discovered continent, for example, it would break down logically into:

#### *Discovery Announced*

An expedition of exploration returns with news of the discovery. The decision is made to colonize the new world.

#### *Outfitting the Colonizing Expedition*

A leader is chosen and several officers appointed to the expedition (the PCs). They supervise the outfitting of the expedition, deal with attempts to undermine or cancel the expedition, attempts to use it politically, attempts to cut its funding, and so on.

#### *Making The Voyage*

The expedition is ready and sets off for the New World. Before they can get there, they must overcome severe challenges.

#### *Establish The Colony*

Landfall at last! The colonies are established, but the new colonists face unexpected dangers from natives and wild animals the like of which they have never seen before. To make matters worse, the climate is turning against them. And then they discover another nation has also landed colonists and laid claim to the continent!

### *Growth and Confinement*

Having survived the initial phase of settlement, the colony is booming. It has several neighboring colonies, some allies, some enemies. But rule from afar is beginning to grate, and decisions are being made that favor the home country over the colony – something the colonists begin to resent.

### *Revolution and Independence*

Things boil over into a revolution, something the mother country won't take lying down. Will the colonies succeed in uniting with each other and winning their independence?

Does the above sound familiar? It should – it's a narrative describing the colonizing and independence of America, compressed to fit within the single lifetime of a band of PCs.

Logical Phasing breaks the campaign into discrete logical stages. The adventures that fit within each stage are often radically different from those sensible in a different stage (some ideas will work in multiple stages, though).

### **Thematic Phasing**

Sometimes a campaign's themes change and evolve in the course of the campaign. If handled well, this approach can yield a grandeur and epic sweep to the campaign. If handled poorly, it's just confusing. You could summarize the themes of the "America" campaign as "Politics, Exploration, Politics, Revolution," for example, where these are successive and not parallel.

Another one might be “Signs and Portents; The Coming Of Shadows; Point Of No Return; No Surrender, No Retreat; The Wheel Of Fire.” This should sound familiar to anyone who has watched Babylon-5.

### **Dramatic Phasing**

Here’s another criteria to consider. “Inconvenience, Passing Difficulties, Direct Threat, Life Or Death, All or Nothing.” This is an example of phasing where the dramatic significance of the outcomes is the distinguishing factor.

When the campaign starts, the worst that can happen is inconvenience, a temporary setback of no real note. Through progressive stages, plotlines become critical and the risks ever greater until finally the point of playing for all the marbles is reached in “All or nothing.” This could be about alien invasion, zombie apocalypse, fall of an empire, or any of a dozen other subjects and settings in almost as many genres. There are worse ways to structure your campaign.

### **Emotive Phasing**

Another choice is the emotional overtone you want to dominate the plotline. A great example would be a campaign whose emotive overtones follow the Five Stages Of Grief because a deity was killed during the climax of the precursor campaign, or at the very least, his death became inevitable. (The stages are Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance.) Or, perhaps the campaign is the life story of a particular ruler, as viewed through the eyes of the PCs.

## General Phasing

Most people will recognize the stages of general phasing. They are components of virtually every large narrative work.

### *Introductions*

Establish the foundations of the situation and introduce the key players.

### *Developments*

Something happens that makes the lives of the key players interesting.

### *Reactions*

People react to the changing circumstances. But consequences continue to mount until....

### *Things Get Worse*

It's only now the real seriousness of the situation becomes apparent. Friends often become enemies in this phase.

### *Revelations*

Heading toward a climax, this is the GM's last chance to reveal who the real opposition has been all along, or what's really been going on. Former enemies may become allies.

### *The Chips Come Down*

The enemy makes his move, or the PCs move against the real source of their problems. Either way, both sides are now fully committed.

### *Payoffs & Conclusion*

The big conclusion, and everything that's been leading up to it yields a payoff or resolution. The plot threads all come together, and are wrapped up in suitably dramatic fashion.

As such, it makes a great model for a campaign phase structure, and will usually exist in parallel with any other phasing.

### **Plot Arcs & Threaded Narratives**

One of the great strengths of the plot arcs and plot threads system is each plot arc and plot thread can have its own set of general phases. Some plot arcs may wrap up completely in the Introduction and Developments phase. These can be said to exist purely to lay the foundation for complicating another plot thread that follows.

The current Zenith-3 campaign consists of 36 plot arcs, each with a beginning, middle, and end, and many with more complex substructures of the full general-phasing variety. The overall campaign has been structured into 13 phases, each of which has its own distinguishing features of the types discussed above. In the diagram below, campaign phases are in rows and plot arcs are in columns.

# Campaign Creation Guide

PLOT		ARCS																																				
		1*	2	3*	4*	5	6	7	8	9	10*	11*	12*	13*	14*	15*	16	17*	18	19	20*	21	22	23	24	25*	26-29*	30*	31*	32*	33*	36*						
Apoc phase	early	Pill Add	Bill + Exalt	Mon	Voc Acc Mt	Organizing	Bluro/Gaunt I	Kabo Slop	V Bural	Lod adverse	Kzin	DC	Wipe Yazac	CH Merab /Alph Ocade	JF	Roll	St B Meab	Jerkin Raon	Milabab/Elasac	Goac	TW I	Eluro/ Swarr II	Mabab OLOKA	White Tower	On vacation	Logos	TW II V	High synch	staged	Space Glocks /The Middle	TW VI VII	Palabab/Scarab/ Stabac	Non-arc	early				
Pre-apocal type	9																																		5	5		
	8																																			11	8	
	7																																				15	7
	6																																				12	6
	5																																				9	5
	4																																				4	4
Apoc type	3																																			3	3	
	2																																				-	2
	1																																				-	1
	0																																				-	0
	-1																																				-	-1
	-2																																				-	-2
-3																																				-	-3	
Apoc type phase	early mid s	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26-29								Non-arc	early mid s		

The 13 phases are grouped into six overall stages:

1. Phases 9 to 6 are “Pre-apocalypse”
2. Phases 5 and 4 are “Apocalypse Stage 1”
3. Phases 3 and 2 are “Apocalypse Stage 2”
4. Phase 1 and 0 are “Apocalypse Stage 3”
5. Phase -1 is “Apocalypse Stage 4”
6. Phases -2 and -3 are Apocalypse Stages 5 and 6, respectively

The whole campaign has been mapped out into 130-odd parts. Only four of the plotlines are unresolved until the big finish – though one the PCS thought was resolved will make a surprise return at the very end.

Pre-apocalypse – that is to say, phases 9 through 6 – occupy about 2/3 of the campaign. Apocalypse Stage 1 occupies about 2/3 of what’s left, and Apocalypse Stage 2 about 2/3 of the balance.

Each of the boxes in phases 1 through -3 represents a single adventure or less. “Apocalypse Phase 0” is the beginning of the cataclysm itself, something I don’t think will surprise anyone. Earlier phases are preliminary skirmishes, maneuvering for position, and so on.

### **The Relevance To A Sequel Campaign**

It might seem obvious, but here it is: the combination of the precursor campaign and the sequel campaign can be viewed as **one big campaign**.

Instead of the climax to the precursor campaign being an end-point, it suddenly becomes a mid-point. Things the players thought they understood in the precursor campaign can prove to have a completely different meaning by the time you’re finished with them. Making the precursor campaign (at least nominally) part of a broader structure carries a lot of advantages.

It totally does away with the “blank sheet of paper” problem. It automatically builds in player and character expectations. It predefines the answers to a lot of the big-picture questions – and does so in a way the GM should be reasonably comfortable with, because he ran the entire precursor campaign that way.

It’s like saying “The Hobbit” is Book 1 of “The Lord of The Rings” – the plot connections between the two become immediately apparent, as does the whole backstory of the ring (so far as it is known to Frodo at the start of the latter book).

But the sequel campaign, viewed in this way, also has all the advantages of a reboot of the series. Anything that didn't quite work in the old campaign can be tweaked and adjusted as desired, so long as a few core elements remain.

Here's another way of looking at it: the precursor campaign was the TV pilot, and the new campaign is the TV series. Very few shows make the transition from pilot to series without a few tweaks along the way. Sometimes the changes are dramatic, with a largely different cast, and other times they are barely noticeable. And, once you have planning for the new campaign underway, you can set aside the old one without even mentioning its existence to the players.

### **Plots or Encounters in Each Phase**

Each phase in the campaign will have certain preordained plots and encounters in addition to those isolated adventures. These will stem from one of three sources:

- Conflicts
- Confluences
- Continuations

These encounters and plots all exist simply because NPC A or Plot Circumstance B came about in an earlier plotline.

### **Conflicts**

For example, if you establish a rabidly anti-religious villain who likes to run around burning churches to the ground, he's likely to put in an appearance if a plotline in the new phase involves constructing a new temple of special significance or opulence.

If you have established a kingdom with a vested interest in controlling the trade routes between two rival nations, they are likely to react when the PCs start a shipbuilding industry in one of those nations, giving them a capacity they never had before. Anyone of special significance to a campaign should react to any development within it – whether that reaction manifests as an event of significance to, or is even noticed by, the PCs.

Every adventure should be reviewed before, during, and after it is run with a view to answering the question, “Who’s going to have a problem with these events or this outcome?”

### **Confluences**

Events represent opportunities to some NPCs who will take advantage of those opportunities if they can, and might try to do so regardless of the likelihood of failure. If you only have a 1% chance of success, you only have to try 100 times to have a reasonable level of hope that your ship will come in. Heck, every time after the first 49 should be an overall 50-50 shot or better – the chances of any one scheme succeeding remain miniscule, but persistence will win in the end!

Every adventure should be reviewed before, during, and after it is run with a view to answering the question, “For whom do these events or this outcome offer an opportunity – and what will they do about it?”

### **Continuations**

Some plotlines simply occur because the main plotline hasn't run its course yet. KAOS will still go after Maxwell Smart, it's what they do. 'More of the same' should always be on the agenda!

### **Organizing Your Ideas**

This advice will apply generally to all campaigns, but especially to those that don't employ the threaded-narrative approach.

### **Index Cards or Post-It Notes**

The best approach is to use index cards or Post-It notes. TV shows do this all the time to decide how to structure their scenes in an episode and how to structure their episodes into a season.

On each, use about half the card or note to summarize, as succinctly as possible, one of your plot ideas. Then put them on a table or stick them to a whiteboard so you can move them around as necessary to group them. I like to number each one as a reference point.

How you group them depends on the type of phasing you've picked. Some adventure ideas work better early in a campaign,

others might be better placed later. But I'll get into that after commenting on a couple of organization alternatives.

### **Virtual Cards**

These are the computer-based version of your yellow Post-It notes. You will want software that lets you put them anywhere you want and move them with just a mouse-click. I've seen some that always place them at a fixed point on the screen and some that won't let you move them at all. Neither is useful for this purpose.

I'm not a big fan of virtual cards.

### **Mind-Mapping Software**

Same idea, different interface. 'Nuff said.

### **Cut and Paste**

One of the simplest approaches, and one I have used many times, is to open two documents in your favorite word processor and put them side by side. One contains all your unorganized ideas, and the other is empty. You'll create headings in the empty one as necessary, and then cut and paste ideas from the master list until they all have a home in the new, organized list – except for the ones left over and don't fit, of course.

### **Organization Structure**

The major way of organizing these cards, Post-It's or notes is by plot thread (if you're using a threaded model) and campaign phase. I like to note six things beyond idea number and the synopsis:

#### *Campaign Phase*

If you've decided you want your campaign to be phased "Happy, Sad, Angry, Hopeful, Desperate" then the first thing you will want to do is identify which, if any, of these categories the adventure idea fits into. You will often get more than one answer. To save space, I will use a numeric code or an alphabetic one – "Ha, Sa, An, Ho, De" would do. Use a row for each phase and do a special "legend" card that prominently identifies the phases of the campaign to use as a heading for the row.

#### *Theme*

If you've decided on one or more campaign themes, consider each idea for whether or not it represents one particular theme from amongst those listed. Unless you have deliberately chosen to have your thematic structure evolve during the course of the campaign, you will want to have at least one example of each theme in each phase of the campaign. Use a column for each theme, and do a special card that prominently identifies that theme to use as a heading.

### *Content*

I'll use a one-word summary for the style of adventure. "Drama, Action, Twist, Emotional, Soft, Talky" – whatever comes to mind. You don't want two of the same thing in succession. If needed, I'll use two words. I might then add one more word if it's justified: "Necessary."

### *Fun*

A rating (none, 1, 2, or 3 stars) for how much fun I think the adventure idea will be. If I'm pressed, I might use two different colors and rate each for fun from both GM and player points of view – but I usually don't bother. Prioritize the ones that are going to be the most fun.

### *Completeness*

How complete and ready to run is the idea in its current form? Some of my ideas are multipage, detailed affairs that could be run without further development, others are nothing more than a single line: "Killer Computer, twist is..." This permits you to pick and choose between your ideas based on the amount of prep time you have available at the time that you are doing prep. I usually rate them 0 to 3 stars, where 0 is the least complete and 3 is almost ready to go.

### *Participation*

Finally, if there's a specific character type or race who is going to find the adventure particularly significant or interesting, I note who they are on the card/note. If you know who the new PCs are going to be, you can restrict yourself to them as

individuals, otherwise you will have to be more general in your approach.

### **The Process**

So, rate each adventure and then stick the card or note in the appropriate spot. If there is already an idea in that space, the order (front to back) should be:

1. Any that are “Necessary”
2. Highest combined Fun & Completeness rating (break ties with Fun rating)

Some spots will fill with multiple ideas, some might not have any. When you’re finished, you will have a row of ideas for phase 1, another for phase 2, a third for phase three, and so on.

After any “Necessary” ones needed to set up the big finish or communicate a key theme, concept, or plot development, then the idea on top will be the one that is most fun for the least effort.

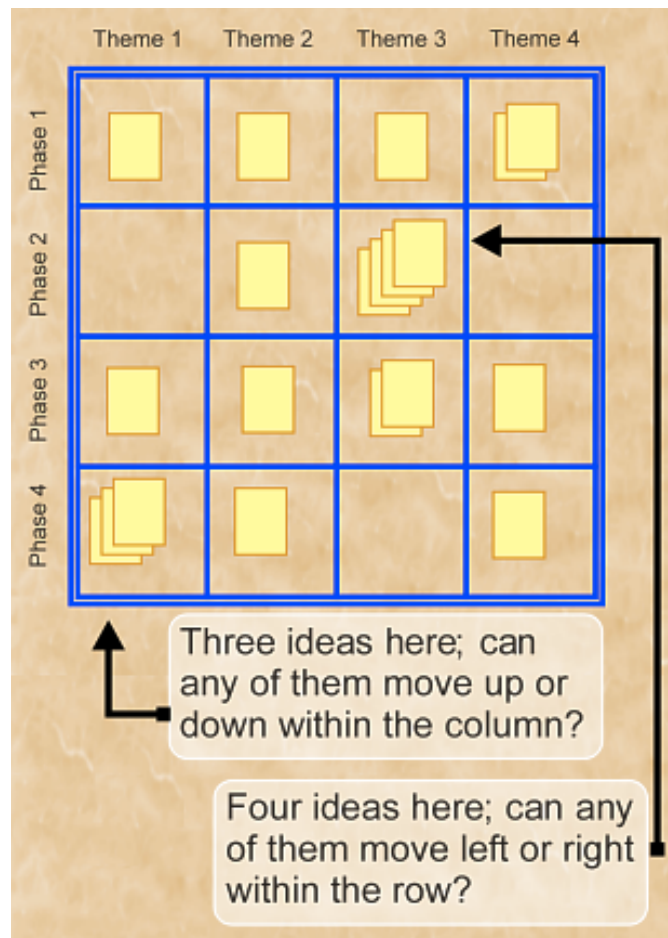
Don’t be surprised if your ideas reveal a development line as the campaign unfolds, in which one theme starts out as dominant but another comes to the fore as that one fades out. And don’t be surprised if particular campaign phases show a preference for certain types of adventure or themes. You can spot and analyze all sorts of patterns and progressions within the overall campaign.

## Save Your Unused Ideas

Save all discarded ideas. You never know when one will come in handy! I'll even rate them in the same way as the ones actually in use for the campaign just to make it easier and faster to pluck one out of the slush heap if I really need it.

## Fill In The Empty Boxes

It does no good if all your ideas are in the middle, or at the start, or at the finish. It's not good if all your ideas cluster around only two or three themes. But here's the best part: since you already thinking along the right lines, this is the best possible time to fill in some of those empty boxes.



## Campaign Creation Guide

1. Go to the first stack of ideas within that theme you have (if any). Leaving the top one, reconsider the rest, in the order they are stacked. Are there any that can be moved to an earlier phase or a later phase? If not, put them back where they came from and move on to the next stack within the theme.
2. Once you have worked your way through all the second-best-or-worse-within-theme ideas, if you still have empty boxes, look across the phase at adventure ideas that speak to other themes (leaving the topmost one in place). Can any of them speak to the theme that's unrepresented? Can you add a twist to the plot idea to incorporate a theme that needs filling?
3. If the space still needs filling, you have three choices:
  - Leave it empty.
  - Look further afield – check your slush pile again. Look in any related themes outside of that phase that have multiple entries for one that can be massaged to fit.
  - Come up with a new plot idea right now. Look at the theme that is unfilled and ask yourself how that theme might show up in a plot during that particular phase of the campaign.

The one thing you should never, ever do is mark the space “TBIL” (To be inspired later).

### **Tweak the Necessary Ideas**

Next, look at any plot ideas marked as “Necessary” and have at least one other idea in the same pigeonhole. Do any of them have 1 star or less for fun? If so, can any of the more fun ideas

underneath be tweaked to incorporate whatever element made this plot point “Necessary?”

### **Cull the Excess Ideas**

Next, go through any stack with multiple ideas. Eliminate unnecessary ones with 1 star or less for both fun and work, and put them back into the slush pile. If there are still multiple cards/notes in a slot, repeat the process for any with 1 or 0 stars for fun. You only want to keep the best. (Don’t throw the cards away, you might need them back in a minute).

### **NPC Comeuppance**

Do any of the remaining ideas feature NPCs who need to get what’s coming to them before the end of the campaign? If so, is there such a payoff plot point somewhere on the table? If not, choose an appropriate idea from the slush pile, mark it “Necessary” and add the notation “Payback (NPC Name)” – and immediately add one star of fun for the “just deserts” factor. Then put it in the appropriate phase and theme space.

### **Compile the Campaign Plan**

Go across the table and on each card add the Phase Number. That adventure idea is now committed to taking place within that particular phase. As you finish each phase, gather all the cards in that row and put them in a stack. The final step is to compile these stacks into a document. This could be as simple as “Phase 1, Theme 1, Adv 07, 23; Theme 2, Adv 11; Theme 3, Adv 16” and so on. You are now free to pick and choose these ideas for development into adventures as you see fit.

### **Continuity**

Sorry, we're not quite done yet. You can't have a villain doing something after you've written them out of the campaign. You can't have a trading consortium make someone an offer after their ready cash was stolen in an adventure (unless the PCs recover the loot of course). With your ideas more or less in rough order, go through the stack one more time looking for any such continuity foul-ups. You need to fix them before your campaign plan is complete. If necessary, subdivide the phase.

### **The Campaign Creation Endpoint**

So, if you follow the procedure, what do you end up with?

#### **Plot Threaded Model**

Instead of themes, these work on plot threads as the organizing principle. Otherwise it's exactly the same. However, as an extra step, the threaded model requires you to actually assign each adventure an order in which they will occur.

So, what you will end up with is a structure something like this:

- Campaign Phase
  - Phase description
    - Themes and related notes;
    - Adventure 1 within the phase, with Plot thread or arc; themes; notes, rating;
    - Adventure 2 within the phase, details as above;

...and so on. After all the adventures in Phase 1, you'll have Phase 2, then 3, and so on.

Every adventure occurs in its allocated place for a reason. Make sure you note that reason, so you know what you have to fix if the PCs Wild-Card messes up your plans.

### **Sandboxed Model**

The sandboxed model is just as simple. It will look something like this:

- Campaign Phase
  - Phase description;
  - Adventure 1 within the phase, with themes; notes and ratings;
  - Adventure 2 within the phase, details as above;

...and so on. After all the adventures in Phase 1, you'll have Phase 2, then 3, and so on.

To use this list, simply look at the current phase of the campaign, find the adventure that fits the amount of prep time you have available, choosing the most fun one first, and that's

the adventure you write up for your next game session. But you can only get out of that phase after all the necessary plot points have been ticked off (and should only get out of the phase after all the three-stars-for-fun ideas are taken care of, at the least).

### **Applying These Principles to Non-Sequel Campaigns**

Most of the difference between a sequel campaign and a non-sequel campaign is the existence of the precursor campaign. That means the players will have certain expectations of the sequel they would not have of a new campaign, and some of the prep has been done already. But it also means in some respects the GM has a little less freedom. Hopefully, he will need less freedom anyway, because parts of the new campaign are preordained by the old one. Don't be surprised if you need an entire phase or three of the campaign just to sweep away parts of the past that are going to get in the way of the new campaign later on – especially if you choose a short interval between campaigns.

Beyond these effects, the techniques described work for ANY sequel or non-sequel campaign (some other campaign types like Prequels are a whole different kettle of fish).

## Final Thoughts

Campaigns are precious things. They are a collection of stories and experiences tied together by a common thread. That thread might be the same group of players, the same group of characters, a dynamic setting, a villain and his legacy, or something else. As long as that thread exists to connect all the adventures together.

It's sad most campaigns finish with a fizzle instead of fireworks. I believe a successful campaign needs several ingredients, which hopefully have been addressed in this guide. At the least, it needs a great concept or seed, a compelling shared story, and an organized GM with the passion and energy to see it through to the end.

Every campaign you finish makes future campaigns more likely to succeed. So it's important to hone your campaigncraft skills, not just for the immediate pleasure of gaming, but for your long-term satisfaction and feeling of fulfillment with your friends and hobby.

Please put this guide to good use.

And have more fun at every game!

- Johnn

# More GM Books & Resources

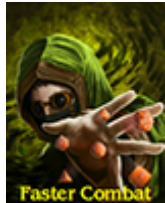
## [Game Master Tips in Your Inbox](#)



Improve your GMing and have more fun at every game. Receive free GM tips sent to your inbox each week. Plus coupons and special deals on my books and courses. I also pass along all the great GM advice readers send in!

[Find out more »](#)

## [The GM's Guide to Faster Combat](#)



End the grind. 267 pages show you exactly how to **cut combat time in half while adding twice the story**. After reading this book you'll know how GM epic, exciting, short combats.

*"The book is AWESOME, well thought out and executed. We've taken some ideas of how to speed up combat from your book and they're quite helpful. But you also spend a lot of time talking about crafting a story, and how to integrate combat into that. I will [be] rereading the entirety of the book."* - Chuck Lawton, Wired/GeekDad

[Find out more »](#)

## [GM Mastery: NPC Essentials](#)



The DEFINITIVE sourcebook on how to design amazing NPCs. Winner of the Gold ENnie, this book helps you design realistic and unforgettable characters. Charts, tables and step-by-step instructions guide you to unforgettable GMing. Rated 5/5 stars!

*"This product is far and away one of the best purchases I have made."*  
- Christopher Sargent

[Find out more »](#)