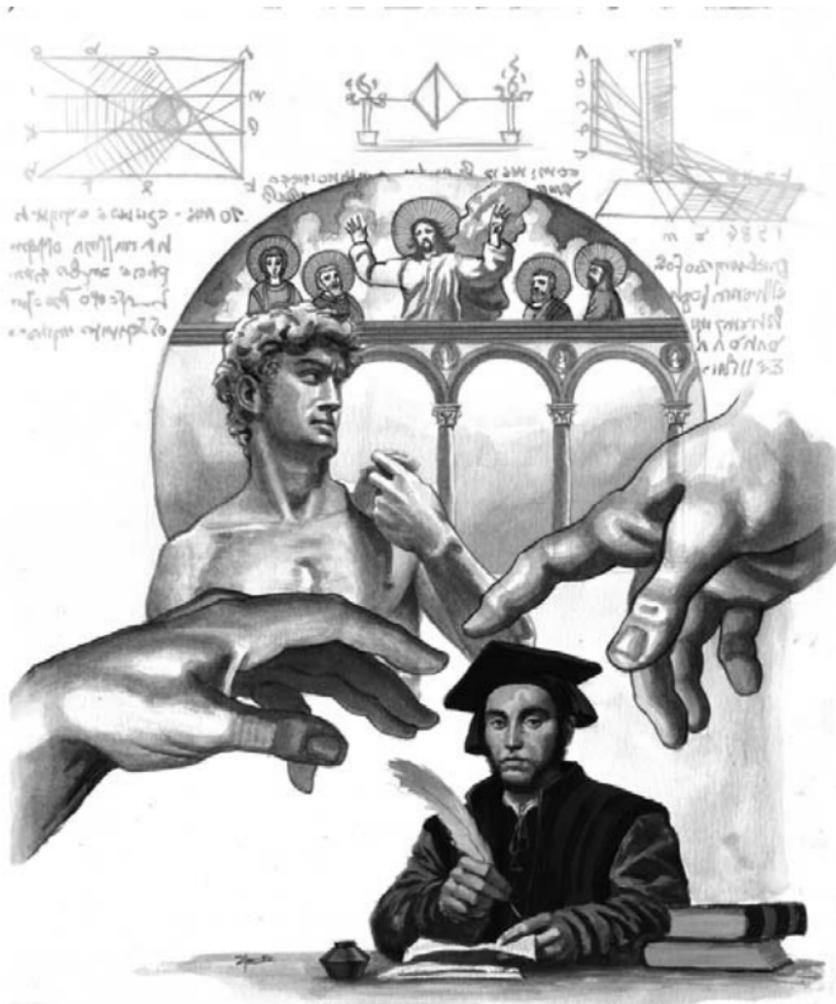# How to Design an Adventure

By Mark O'Bannon

Designing an adventure for use in an *Interactive Storytelling Game* is not as hard as it may seem. In the past, it could often take up to a week to create an adventure, but with the methods presented here, it can now be done in about half an hour.

While there are many techniques for running *Interactive Storytelling Games*, the method presented here is mainly concerned with creating a solid plot or structure in the form of an outline.

How much preparation is required?

Many authors like to create character histories, backgrounds, detailed settings, plots, local events, rumors and other kinds of material they often refer to as background material, but in practice, you don't need large piles of notes to create a good story. This is what they call, "World Builder's Disease." This preparation can be useful, but if carried to an extreme, it will only slow things down.

When creating an adventure, put in only the essential elements of the story. This will drastically reduce your design time. In the end, you will find that an entire plotline can be written on one page.

Story Elements

When reduced to it's essential elements, the format of storytelling has not changed in thousands of years. All stories have a protagonist (main character), the quest (goal), trials (opposition) and the resolution, positive or negative. Many variations are possible within this format, but the basic structure is the same.

When designing an adventure, keep these things in mind: The *characters*, the *story goal*, the *conflict*, and the *climax*.

The Characters

The main protagonist of the story will be one of the player characters. The other characters will also affect the story, but the focus should usually be on a single person. When you begin a new story, you can shift the focus to a different character. A character is primarily defined by *what he does*, not by his appearance. The other essential elements of a character are his *goals, motivations, needs* and *flaws*.

What **goal** the character is pursuing in life will affect everything he does. Also, his **motivation** will provide a reason for much of his behavior. The character's **inner need** should be blocked by his **main character flaw**, which will create a source of *internal*

conflict that you can use to build story tension.

A story will have other kinds of characters, such as **minor characters**, which are played by the *Storyteller*, and **placeholder characters**, which simply perform a single function in the story and then go away.

The Story Goal

In the first scene of a story, *something happens* that will completely change the character's world.

This **Inciting Incident** will throw everything out of balance, and the characters will be compelled to do something to restore order. This story goal should be present in some form in every scene, even if it is only lurking in the back of the mind.

The Conflict

Conflict is the fuel that propels the story forward. Without conflict, there is no story. Conflict of some kind should be present in every scene.

There are three kinds of conflict:

1. Man vs. man.
2. Man vs. environment.
3. Man vs. himself.

In most cases, the character will be pitted against some other character, such as an ogre, an evil knight, or the main villain. In other cases, you can structure a scene where other kinds of conflict are the main opposition to progress (such as a snowstorm).

Another technique to build story tension is to *layer conflict*. This is where many kinds of conflict are present within the same scene. For instance, a greedy character may have to choose between helping a friend or taking a treasure (internal conflict), while the main villain is trying to kill him (external conflict), and at the same time the scene could take place within a ruined, unstable castle (environmental conflict).

Always keep in mind what the main villain of the story is doing. The villain's actions and reactions are often felt throughout the story.

The Climax

Also known as the *Showdown*, this final battle between the main character and the villain should create a final resolution to the story. The characters need not win. In many stories, the main character dies in pursuit of his goal.

The final climactic scene is the culmination of all the conflict in the story, and the stakes should be at

their highest in this scene. Everything in the story will point towards this final scene.

The Scene

A scene is the basic building block of a story, and a collection of scenes will form the basic structure that is used to tell a tale. The most important thing to remember is to *start to think in scenes.*

A story is about a character that is trying to solve a problem. In every case, there will be some sort of opposition, interfering with his success.

So every scene should contain both a *goal* and a source of *conflict*. This is the basic structure of a scene.

How to Create a Plot Outline

1. First choose a *setting*.

2. Create a *story goal* and a *villain*.

3. Then create a *plot (a list of scenes).* Each scene will lead into the next one.

4. Then make *maps* of the places in the story (scenes) and place the players into the world.

In this way, an adventure should take about 30 minutes to 2 hours to create. An entire story should

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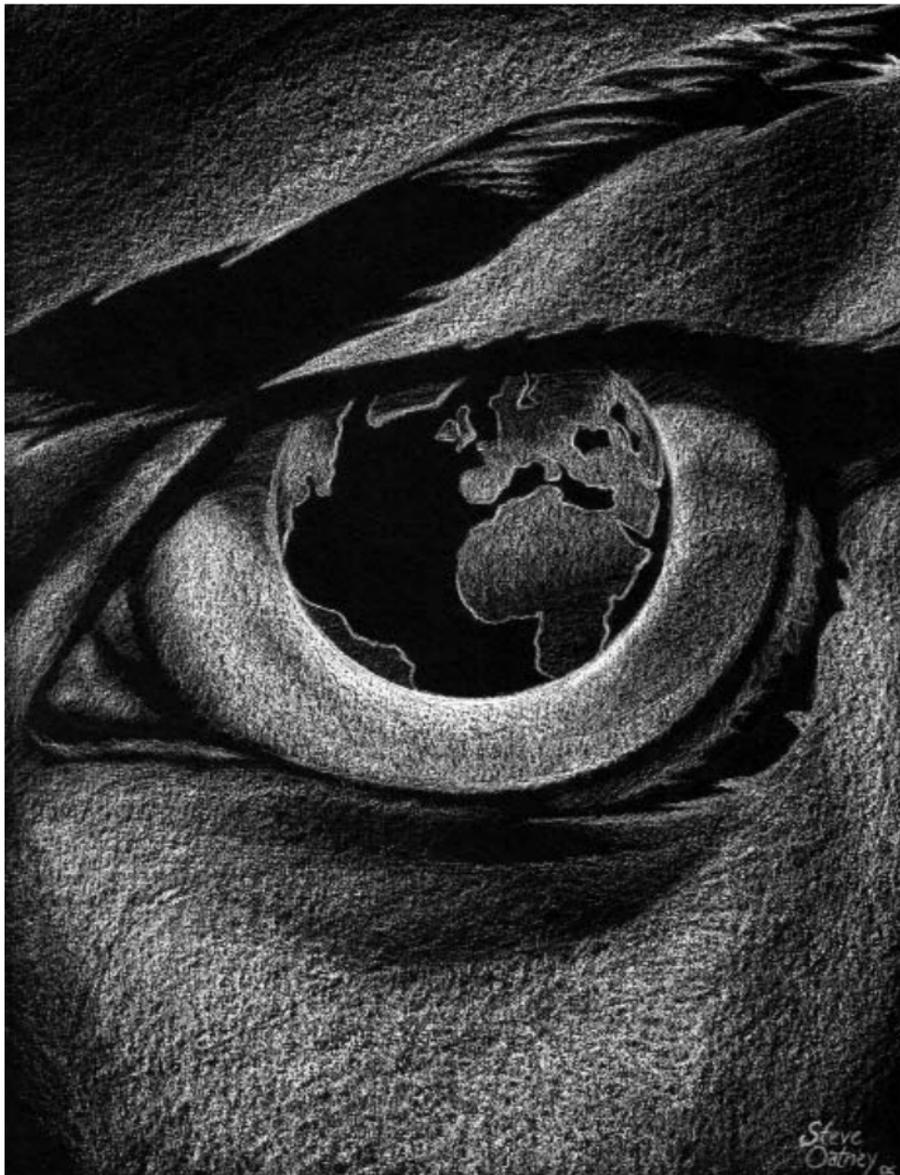
consist of from one to four gaming sessions. If you
want to continue playing, just start another story.

Story Format

Here is the format used while designing an
adventure:

Story Goal & Opposition

A single paragraph describing the main story
goal, and the opposition (usually the villain & his
henchmen), which is the main source of conflict.

Genre, Time, Setting & Mood

A single paragraph describing what kind of
story is being told.

Is it a horror story, a romance, a mystery, a
fairy tale, an action tale?

The time period and the location of the story
should also be described, as well as what kind of emo-
tional atmosphere is used in telling the tale.

Backstory

A single page describing what happened in the
past that led up to the events at the start of the story.

Scene Outline

A single page outline of the story, listing three or more scenes in this format:

1. Scene Title
   Goal:
   Opposition:
   Setting:
   Tie-in:

2. Scene Title
   Goal:
   Opposition:
   Setting:
   Tie-In:

3. etc.

Goal

Every scene should have a goal, such as to cross a bridge, obtain an important item or to discover something. These minor goals will lead toward the final goal.

Opposition

Whatever is trying to stop the characters from

completing their immediate goal will provide the source of conflict.

It could be an evil knight, a monster, or something in the environment like a brushfire or a rainstorm. Internal conflcts can sometimes be used, such as trying to overcome a phobia.

Setting

The location where the scene takes place can be a castle, village, roadway, garden, etc. The time and place will have a drastic affect what happens in the scene or how it plays out.

Tie-In

This is something that points towards the next scene, such as a map or piece of information that will help the characters reach their main goal.

Scene Details

If desired, you can write more detailed descriptions, describing in very high detail the scenes listed in the outline. These can be used by the *Storyteller* to describe the setting where the scene takes place.

Keep in mind, however that reading aloud to the players should be avoided, if possible.

Additional Elements

In addition to the single page used for the plot, you can also list the allies of the main villain. Then add the maps of the locations where the scenes take place and you are ready to begin.

How Many Scenes?

Since every story is different, varying amounts of time will be required. It all depends on how long of a story you want to tell, and how much time you have.

If a *very short story* is desired, it could consist of only a single scene. This scene will be the climax of the story, presupposing everything else has already taken place.

For *short stories*, at least three scenes should be used (beginning, middle and end).

For *average stories*, six scenes are often used, since you can use one scene for each of the six stages of a story.

For *longer tales*, a dozen or more scenes can be used. These stories will usuallly take several game sessions to complete.

Expect to complete one scene every 1-2 hours of game time. This is because *Fantasy Imperium* combat is quite fast (30 minutes for a small fight).

13

Example of a Scene

3. Scene Title: The Shadows Attack
  Goal: Escape from the haunted tower!
  Opposition: A dozen wraiths.
  Setting: The Black Tower.
  Tie-in: Inscription that leads to the lost city.

The Six Stages of a Story

  1. Introduction – Inciting Incident.
  2. Rising Action – Significant Event.
  3. Complications – Plot Twist.
  4. Crisis – Decisive Moment.
  5. Climax – Confrontation.
  6. Resolution – Outcome.

Motivation

  Motivation is one of the most important elements of a story. To motivate the characters, you need to make it personal. Never hire characters to do a job. Kidnap their girlfriend. Murder their family. Burn their house down. The characters of a story have to care about it.

  Evaluate what is important to the characters and then try to integrate it into the plot. In this way, they will be interested enough to move forward.

Which is more important? Plot or character?

It has been said that a story is not what happens, but a story is who it happens to. A story is about how characters react to and are affected by the events in the story. Don't confuse the events of a story (plot) with a forced path. The true path of a story is how it affects the characters. If they are emotionally involved in the story, then they will not feel forced because they are doing what they want (pursuing the goal, which is provided by a *Storyteller* that understands how to best motivate them).

Player Freedom

Always allow the players to try anything they want, even if it deviates from your story outline.
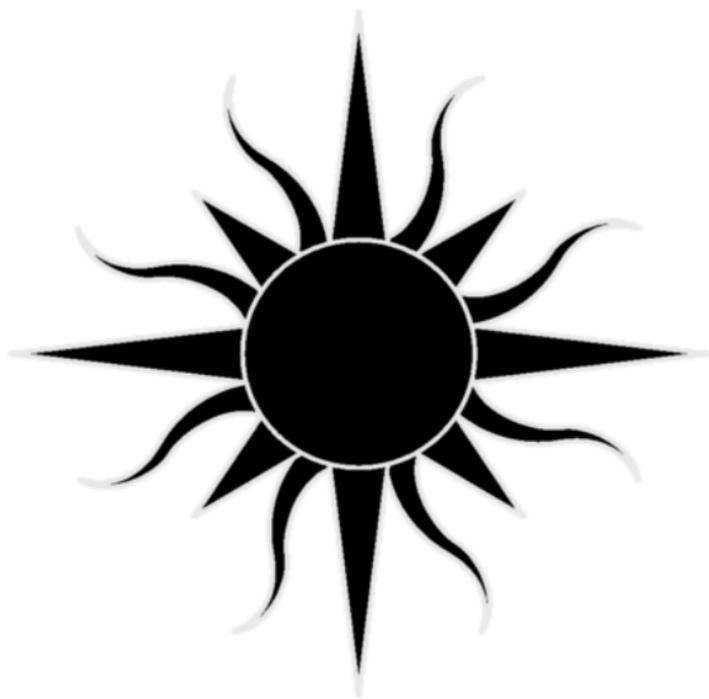
If needed, you can *skip scenes or run them out of order.*

If a player goes in an entirely new direction, simply take a minute and *write out a new scene with a tie-in back to your plotline.*

Don't push the players into your story, pull instead by showing them what will happen if they fail in their quest.

Minor characters can often be used to gently remind the characters of what they need to do.

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