1120. THE SEVEN-POINT PLOT

Whether the game style decided upon by all those gathered around the table-top role-playing surface is purely Karakán (i.e. combat-oriented) or Hnálla (i.e. combat, relational, investigative, and sorcerous) in nature, seven basic plot points should be experienced during each major scene, complete scenario and overall campaign. They not only contribute to rising action and the build-up of suspense; they also make table-top role-playing a profoundly satisfying experience.

INITIAL SITUATION

Scenes, scenarios and campaigns should open with at least one character in severe conflict over whether to get involved in the adventure set forth by the game referee. Tsolyánu is a complex civilisation, and soldiers, priests, scribes, and fief and province rulers are expected to perform their duties, not continually disappear on missions of dubious legality. Other conflicts can derive from family, clan, love-interests, promises made, membership in various “societies” or even the character’s own personality and psychological make-up.

Major scenarios and the overall campaign should also begin with the mission team in a state of real division.

Take the Planetary Romance section of the original “Star Wars” movie as an example of the above. The main character, Luke Skywalker, wants nothing more than to be a hero, to leave the backwater planet Tatooine; at the same time, however, he feels a strong sense of obligation to his aunt and uncle (who have adopted him and raised him). When Ben Kenobi asks Luke to accompany him to Alderan, the dutiful (though yearning) farmer-boy says, “No”.

Division and conflict should be tied to conflicting goals. Characters have an external goal, an internal goal, and a love-interest; their conflicted initial situation, therefore, should stem naturally from these.

INCITING EVENT(S)

In order that players truly be convinced of their characters’ involvement in the game sessions put forward by the referee, one or more events must push characters in the direction of total involvement. This is an often-neglected aspect of scenario design; it defaults, of course, to the “Job Offer in a Tavern” with which so many role-players are familiar. The weakness of such a device, however, should be apparent to all: the characters have no believable reason to risk their lives once things get deadly.

Take the opening set-piece of “Star Wars”, once again, as an example. Five or more separate events push Luke Skywalker into joining Ben Kenobi’s mission to Alderan: 1) Princess Leia’s message; 2) his rescue by Ben Kenobi; 3) his hatred of the Empire (a repressive presence, even on Tatooine); 4) Ben’s revelations about Luke’s father being a Jedi Knight and his handing over to Luke his father’s Lightsabre; 5) Ben and Luke’s discovery of the Empire’s murder of Luke’s aunt and uncle. These events are convincing; they add strength to all that follows.

POINT OF NO RETURN

At the terminus of the “Set-up Phase” of important scenes, major scenarios, and the overall campaign, characters should clearly and concretely commit to the adventure set forward by the game referee. It is generally not enough for them to simply agree to pursue a quest objective; they ought to experience a “do or die” moment in their collective lives.

Actually, the Point of No Return in “Star Wars” does not occur when Luke Skywalker says to Ben Kenobi, “I want to come with you to Alderan; there’s nothing for me here now.”

Luke’s Point of No Return occurs when he and Ben Kenobi escape from Tatooine in the company of a wanted smuggler. Imperial agents and Storm Troopers lose their lives. There is afterwards no chance of Luke avoiding imperial retribution; his life is permanently altered – it’s “do or die” for him.

This kind of Point of No Return increases believability and suspense, but mistakes do get made. In “Star Wars”, the Point of No Return happens almost halfway into the film. This is far too late. The Set-up Phase of any narrative should terminate roughly a quarter of the way through the entire story. Thus, if your total campaign entails twelve separate scenarios, the Point of No Return should occur in Scenario Three.

THE MIDPOINT REVEAL

In the exact middle of critical scenes, important scenarios and the overall campaign, the player-characters should confront a choice: either 1) pursue a more “selfish” but “safer” path; or, 2) reveal their true priorities (especially to themselves) and expose themselves to direct risk from the opposition. This choice earns for the characters their victory; game referees applying much thought to this plot point guarantee rich feelings of reward once the storyline winds up.

In “Star Wars”, Luke Skywalker and his mission team (comprised also of Han Solo, Chewbacca, C3PO and R2D2) face a choice at the film’s Midpoint Reveal. Having learned that Princess Leia is aboard the Death Star and is scheduled to be executed, they either may remain safe as ordered by Ben Kenobi, or they may risk themselves to save the rebel leader. The fact that they decide on the latter reveals Han to be more than merely mercenary, and focuses Darth Vader’s attention upon them for the first time.

THE MOMENT OF APPARENT DEFEAT

Roughly three-quarters of the way through an important scenario or the overall campaign, a pivotal character or the entire mission team should face what “appears” to be complete and final defeat. This crisis forces the character or mission team to confront (having nothing left to lose by doing so) uncomfortable truths about its methods and goals, and to make permanent sacrifices. These sacrifices, instead of causing debility and paralysis, free unrecognised strengths that the protagonist(s) then bring into the final climactic battle.

The opposition, blinded by its (perceived) looming victory, fails to enter the climactic battle with adequate preparation.

As a result, the characters win!

Of all the plots points discussed in this subsection, this one is the most difficult to do well. “Star Wars” barely makes an attempt; recall the scene where Luke Skywalker, aboard the Millennium Falcon, grieves for the slain Ben Kenobi. The old man’s death does not threaten total defeat. Luke faces no inner demons. No sacrifice is made. No sensation of strength and freedom comes across. Luke simply mopes a bit, then gets busy exacting a little revenge.

The Moment of Apparent Defeat in the original “Toy Story”, in contrast, is beautifully done. Recall the scene in which Woody exists trapped under a milk crate, waiting for an alarm clock to wake Sid Phillips. His fellow toy Buzz Lightyear sits nearby, offering no help whatsoever (having lost his desire to live). Woody, facing death, realises the truth of the situation: his jealousy has brought Buzz and Woody to this pass. Next he admits to Buzz that Buzz is the better toy, and encourages Buzz to escape, leaving a resigned Woody to his fate. This sacrifice jars Buzz Lightyear out of his depression, and the two, together, defeat Sid Phillips and get back home.

Learn from this!

BATTLE

The Battle should follow swiftly after the Moment of Apparent Defeat. It should be a peak-point in terms of conflict intensity. In other words, all involved in the scenario or campaign should agree that the opposition brought “everything available” to the fight. The original “Star Wars” does this adequately; the opposition confronts those for whom the audience is rooting with the Death Star. The weapon’s destruction is a real blow to the Empire.

RESOLUTION

Important scenes, crucial scenarios and the overall campaign should end with some kind of emotionally satisfying ‘moment’. In the original “Star Wars”, the scene in which Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, and Chewbacca are awarded medals by Princess Leia and the rebellion is such a moment.

In the Seal Imperium of Tsolyánu, there are similar medals awarded to those who well serve the Petal Throne.