Writing Good Scenarios

Writing RPGA adventures, or in fact any roleplaying adventures, is not always an easy thing to do. It may look simple, but the difficulties come in the execution. This document will try to help you through the difficult parts, and give you some tips on things to do and things not to do.

First, some terms. A “scenario” is the text manuscript that you want to write, which has been called “module” and “tournament” in the past. An “adventure” is the play experience that the players and game master have using your scenario. “Tournament” is a particular game experience in which adventures are played and some kind of scoring takes place and winners are declared. “Story” in the context of RPGA writing refers to the plot of your scenario, not the whole thing. For example, if in your adventure your villain is besieging castles and the player characters have to stop him, the story covers the history of the villain and how he and the player characters got to the start of the adventure, and then stops. You are writing an adventure scenario, where the player characters are the center of the action and the players make the decisions; you are not writing a story in which the players act out whatever you want them to do, like puppets. Lastly, “encounter” is defined as a single scene with perhaps multiple actions. It is the term used to break down your adventure experience into smaller pieces that each have a beginning and an ending. Encounters can also be called scenes, or parts, or sections.

The Idea

First, you develop a general plot idea. For example, you decide that a necromancer is creating undead armies by massacring villages. That is your general plot idea. Be sure that you're confident in your plot idea before you start. Everything in the adventure should support your basic plot idea. If you change plot ideas, chances are you'd be better off writing a different scenario.

With your general plot in mind, you need to develop some details of how the plot will work itself out, what kinds of things you want to happen, and what kinds of characters you want them to happen to. It may seem strange that you do all these development steps in parallel, but they all inform each other. The kind of action you envision, and the kinds of obstacles and monsters, will determine to a large extent the level or power of characters that should be used in the adventure. Some of the details may cause you to change other details.

If you are writing a scenario for which characters are provided, you have more choices to make about the characters at this point. You should decide their professions or classes, and ensure that you have the right mix for the plot idea you have in mind. You need not make a lot of detailed decisions at this point; just get a picture of the player character group in your mind. If you are writing a campaign scenario, then you need to decide the level range you are writing for based on your plot idea. You should not bend and twist your plot ideas to fit all possible levels; some adventures are just not suitable for player characters of a given level. Write for the player character levels that make sense for your adventure.

Develop your plot idea into an outline of possible scenes or encounters. You should not map it out in detail, as there are some issues to consider which will be covered below, but you'll want to get a general idea of what kinds of things you want. That could be a lot of combat, or no combat, or that you know that you want dragons in the adventure. Write down anything that fits your plot.

Development issues: Time Limit

Most RPGA scenarios are played at RPGA-sanctioned conventions or game days. These shows generally break their schedules into four-hour periods, otherwise known as "slots." One scenario round is meant to provide 3.5 hours of play, with the rest of the slot taken up by player voting and game preparation.

All first-time authors are limited to writing one-round scenarios. Authors with more experience may write multi-round scenarios.

Development issues: Home Campaign vs. Fixed-time Environment

There are some ideas which would make great adventures in your home campaign, but which will not work well in a more public environment. For example, you design a dungeon in which the quadrants of the dungeon exchange with each other. This makes the characters unable to map, and confuses them a lot. This might work well in a home group, where exposure to it is limited. In a more public game, it does not work to base your whole dungeon on the effect. It is really annoying, and you do not want to annoy the players for two hours. That breaks their suspension of disbelief (see below).

When developing your idea, try to keep in mind the extent of elements that might annoy the players, and consider whether they are really necessary or whether they can be shortened. The players only get three and a half hours with your adventure; you don’t have time to make up the annoyances in later game sessions.

It is also important to remember that your adventure is not part of a series, but must have a resolution in the game time allowed. In your home campaign you can stop

at the dramatic moments, or have villains continually getting away, but if there is only the one experience and no sequels to be played, you cannot have the villains getting away. The conflict with them must be resolved for the adventure to have closure. In your home campaign, you can have closure after several adventures, but in the RPGA play setting you must provide closure for each adventure.

Development issues: Types of adventures

Scenario development comes in the form of a plot, or statement of the course of action you expect will be followed in the adventure. There are three general types of plot structures: linear, situation-based, location-based, and matrix. Any of these can be used to create good tournaments.

- Linear adventures, the most common format, are constructed so that A leads to B, which leads to C, and so on. There are no options on which order to take the encounters. When taken to extreme, this can lead to the much-vilified "lead by the nose" approach, and should be avoided. The key to writing good linear adventures is to create the illusion of choice; there could be many choices, but the next encounter is the most logical.
- Situation-based adventures involve encounters that occur when the PCs reach some site or time.
- Location-based adventures are slightly better, but time-based encounters can be used to very good effect as well.
- In Matrix adventures, each encounter is interconnected with several others. For example, A leads to B, C, or E. C leads to D, F, or back to A. The PCs can take one of several paths, though the adventure usually ends in a climactic encounter that may or may not depend on how the PCs got there.

Choose the type of structure that best fits your idea. You may not make this choice consciously; indeed you may decide you want a matrix-based adventure but at the end discover you have designed a situation-based adventure. Just be aware that linear is not the only type of structure you can follow in adventure design.

Avoid railroading the players through your design. If they have no choices, and it is clear to the players that they have no choices, they will not have fun with your scenario. There are ways to funnel the players and yet give them the appearance of free choice.

Development issues: Types of Encounters

In breaking down your plot idea into manageable chunks, you should consider that there are four basic types of encounters:

- Combat encounters occur when the characters fit, whether they fight other people or creatures or animated swords, they are fighting.
- Negotiation encounters occur when the characters have to talk with other beings to move to the next part of the adventure. These are generally referred to as "roleplaying encounters," but in reality every encounter is a roleplaying encounter. In a negotiation, the characters could be talking to people in a bar, buying equipment, or questioning a dragon to get the key to the treasure vault.
- Traps, puzzles, and natural disasters are the same basic type of encounter. They pit the characters against hostile natural forces or the environment. The opposition forces are not intelligent, and the goal of the characters is to survive the opposition.
- Dilemmas are situations where the characters have to make a choice, with serious consequences. Dilemma encounters also involve elements of the other three types, but take each to a new level of difficulty. In a dilemma, the player characters have to decide on moral issues, or have to choose between possibly evil consequences. For example, if the characters have to choose between saving the king, and saving the kingdom, they have a dilemma.

The types of encounters you choose, and the order, depend on the plot you have decided on and the nature of the adversary. Encounters allow the PCs to discover information and try to thwart the villain, and allow the adversary to thwart or kill the characters. The Network recommends that you include one or two combats, two negotiation encounters, a trap or disaster or puzzle, and any additional encounters of your choice. The Network requires that you create a balanced set of encounters, and not choose to use the same type of encounter throughout your scenario. All-combat adventures are just as un-fun as all-puzzle adventures.

When outlining your encounters, put yourself in the villain's mind and think of what he or she would do to advance his or her scheme. Consider the response of the environment, and then allow for possible character choices. The encounters must cover all the probable sources of help and hindrance to the PCs, plus advance the villain's plot. If there is no villain, consider the consequences of the adversary on the PCs, NPCs, and the environment. Avoid designing encounters only because you as author feel that they would be cool. For example, if the villain really would ambush the characters, then put in an ambush. However, the fact that you want a combat about five pages into the adventure and have not thought of a good reason why a combat there would be logical is not a good reason to add an ambush. It is a subtle but important distinction.

Puzzles test the player characters' thinking ability and knowledge base. They do not test the players'

knowledge base, so including puzzles based on math when math is not something the characters would have access to is not a good choice. Further, puzzles should be constructed to fit into the setting you have chosen. Use of modern-world references in a puzzle set in GREYHAWK® or the FORGOTTEN REALMS® is not appropriate, but puzzles using elements in published materials about those worlds would be.

Consider ways to surprise players with each encounter: cunning ways to use monsters and traps, clever methods to conceal treasure, and so forth. When devising encounters, consider giving PCs multiple ways to succeed. Not all encounters can be won with swords and fireballs, not every monster "fights to the death," and not every trap or puzzle has only one solution.

Development issues: Timing

Experience shows that six to eight encounters occupy players for about three and a half hours. This means that the player characters should experience six to eight encounters. You can write more if the adventure will be matrix-based or location-based, as the characters may not experience all the encounters. If your adventure is to fit into two game periods, or seven hours, double the number of encounters or write ones that take much longer to play.

That said, some encounters take more or less time to play than others. For example, talking to the patrons of the bar could take 15 minutes, while the massive battle you have planned could take an hour. You should also remember that players sometimes spend more or less time on an encounter than you think they will. Thus, you need to plan for how long the mythical average group of players will spend on each of your encounters, and not worry about the extreme groups. As you get into more detail, you will get a better idea of how long each encounter should take to play out.

Development issues: Unexpected Player Actions

As you develop your idea, remember that the players will have control when the adventure is played, not you. Therefore, you have to consider what the likely player choices will be to your situations. Then consider some unlikely ones. These are the choices that may result in extra encounters. If the players get sidetracked, you have to get them back into the adventure.

Outlining Your Idea

Now it's time to develop your idea into a full, encounter-by-encounter outline. In this part of the development, you should note down any details you want to be sure are mentioned in the writing phase, note down the types of combatants, the important information to be discovered by the player characters, the mechanism for traps, and so forth. You want to make sure that your ideas dovetail together, and that you have not left anything crucial out. For example, if you note that the characters had to get a key to get into Encounter Seven, and you have not noted down that they got the key in a previous encounter, you should go back and insert the key.

At this point, you develop any important non-player characters (those played by the game master) that will be participating in the adventure, including your villains if you have them. A paragraph personality profile is required for any important non-player character you create, so that the game master can play the character properly. You can develop statistics and skills and so forth at this time.

If you are writing characters, you should detail them more fully at this time. Note personality motivations for participating (called adventure hooks), levels of power and abilities. This is a good time to make sure that the characters you are designing have the skills and knowledge necessary to complete the adventure. The characters are not fully developed yet, but you have a good picture of each one in your head.

Development issues: Checkpoint

With your outline in hand, ask these questions. If you cannot answer them satisfactorily, go back and rework your outline until you can.

- Is the adventure fun? If you would not like to play it after you have worked out the plot outline, you should start over.
- Is the adventure playable in the time allowed? RPGA scenarios have to be played in units of three and a half hours, so if your idea won't fit into three and a half hours, or seven hours, then you should either shorten or lengthen it to fit the required time.
- Is the adventure believable? Players suspend disbelief when roleplaying, and if your scenario jars their suspension of disbelief, the players may mentally jump out of the adventure and back to the real world, and you have lost them. Keep in mind that the whole has to be believable from the characters' point of view, or the players will be dissatisfied.
- Can a total stranger run the adventure you have designed the way you would like it run? More often than not, total strangers will be running your adventures, so you have to include all the information that a game master could reasonably need. If you find yourself making assumptions, then you need to spell them out. Playtesting will show where you need to add more details.
- Do your encounters and problems have more than one solution? Players really dislike being railroaded into a single path or solution. They have

a lot of creativity, and your adventure should allow them to use that creativity.

- Does your adventure idea contain violations of the Standards of Content? See Appendix A of this document for the statement of the Standards of Content. If your adventure violates one or more of the points, re-work it. The standards exist to ensure that game experiences are good for all potential players of our games, and that we do not needlessly offend anyone.

Outline Review

At the point that you are happy with your outline, RPGA suggests that you submit it to HQ for review. Alternately, you can (or should) submit it to the appropriate campaign staff if you are writing a campaign adventure (in this case, submit to your Triad and Regional Reviewer if a Regional scenario). Sending it to HQ will always ensure it goes to the right people. A review by another pair of eyes is very helpful at this stage, because there might be problems with your idea that you have not seen, and which would require major revisions. You should not spend a lot of time writing something that you will have to spend a lot of time revising. HQ will try to respond with a review within a week, but due to travel or workload this is not always possible.

Fleshing out the Scenario

Now it is time to write your adventure! Starting to type can be the hardest part, really. To help you along, consult the format guidelines accompanying this document. The format guidelines contain the necessary elements you must write, and what each should contain. Just write each part, and worry about editing later.

When you detail the encounters, follow your outline. In fact, pull the outline into the scenario document and flesh it out directly. That way you won't forget anything crucial. The detailed write-up of each encounter should include everything that a game master will need to know to run the encounter the way you envisioned it. This includes:

- A short explanation of how the characters got to this encounter. For example, "the characters get here by pulling the silver key in Encounter Two, or by defeating the brigands in Encounter Three."
- Location descriptions, including detailed dimensions of any important objects. Dimensions of a trap are important, dimensions of a rug that just happens to be in the room are not.
- Statistics and personality notes for all non-player characters and foes. Game masters should not have to reference game books to get the basic statistics for the beings he or she has to play for the players.
- Motivations, tactics, and actions of non-player characters and foes, especially as they relate to the player characters.
- Bulleted lists of any knowledge that the characters could acquire, or clues that they can find. Bulleted lists help the game master find the information quickly.
- Alternative solutions to the problems that you present, especially when magic can be used. Giving the game master suggestions on how to handle multiple solutions helps him or her to adjudicate things that you did not think of.
- Consequences of player decisions on later parts of the adventure.
- Where the players can go next. It is crucial that you explain what encounters the characters can go to from each encounter.

This is the place where you have to think about your own assumptions, and include the information that you know very well but that a stranger might not know. There is, however, a balance between including the necessary information and including too much information. Don't include too much information, as extra unnecessary information makes it harder for the game master to keep your main ideas in his or her head. For example, it is necessary to include the personalities of the non-player characters with whom the player characters will interact. It is not necessary to include personality descriptions for everyone that the player characters could meet, especially if they are not relevant to the adventure. In getting the details perfect on irrelevant matters, the game master may overlook what you really want him or her to convey to the players.

Maps, Handouts, and Appendices

While you are designing, you will probably note where certain handouts would be cool, or where maps are needed, or where additional information would be helpful. This information all goes in the back of the adventure.

Maps should be relevant to the adventure, providing needed information. A map of the area where the town is located is not necessary if the characters can never leave the town. On the other hand, a map of the tavern layout is not necessary either unless you anticipate a battle will be fought there and the game master needs to see the tactical situation. Maps are frequently useful for the game master even if the players will never see them, and those maps which really help the game master run the adventure better should be included.

Handouts contain things like puzzles for the players to look at, letters, telegraph messages, and so forth. Again, handouts are cool, but make sure they are relevant or needed. The menu from a tavern is not a necessary

handout unless there is some clue that is presented on it that you want the players to see. As a prop it is cool, but the game master can make props. Letters that invite the characters to the adventure are not generally useful handouts, but if the handwriting on that letter is going to be relevant later then you should include it as a handout.

Appendices contain information that is useful or necessary but which would disrupt the adventure text if it were included in the middle. For example, if a non-player character recurs in four encounters, list the non-player character in an Appendix, so you don't have to list him or her four times. If you create a new spell, creature, or item, you should provide a full write-up in an appendix, according to the format for the game system in which you are writing. The new thing belongs in an appendix, however, because including a new monster description in the middle of Encounter Four will disrupt the game master's reading of the scenario unnecessarily.

Provided Player Characters

Some scenarios come with characters provided. These characters need to be fully detailed, with all statistics and skills and spells and equipment given to the players. Character background is required, and also you should include what the characters know about the other characters. When characters are provided, you should spend at least as much time on them as you do on the adventure, because the characters *are* the adventure. If the characters are mediocre, even a great adventure is a lesser experience. Great characters stimulate roleplaying amongst the players, which leads to a better game experience.

Player characters can be anything you want, from people to animals to monsters to sentient objects. Humanoids (and particularly the ones that the players can relate to) are more common, and more popular. People may occasionally enjoy roleplaying stuffed animals, but they won't like that all the time. Each game system contains some way to balance characters against each other, so that each is equivalent in power level. It is important that all the characters be of nearly equal power level because an under-powered character may make a player feel like he is useless, which destroys his game experience. On the other hand, you can make up for underpowered characters by making them interesting in other ways.

Personalities and motivations are the most important part of a character, so work on them. The character group should have some reason to stay together, even if they hate each other, and some history of interactions between the characters is helpful. If you created an underpowered character, you can balance him or her with respect to the other characters by giving him or her extra roleplaying hooks. Generally, at least two paragraphs on each player character are required, and you should detail the background of the character and how the character got to the start of the adventure. You should also make clear the character's opinions and outlook on major issues. A stranger has to make your invention come to life, so give the player something to work with. Be careful not to write too much, though. Fill in the sketch well enough that the player can grasp the personality that you want, and then stop. You should give the player some room to add his or her own stamp to the character.

Characters should be two pages long if at all possible. Three pages is allowable, and four if you are including a lot of obscure game system information for the player to use. Do not, however, write a four-page background of the character and then add statistics. You cannot expect the average player to hold four pages of text in memory after 15 minutes of reading.

RPGA scenarios are written for six player characters. Fewer or more can be allowed if your adventure requires a change, but try to design six-character adventures.

Editing and Proofreading

Once you have written the entire tournament, it is time to go back through and edit it. Check for spelling and grammatical errors, but also look for extraneous information, redundant sentences, ambiguous language, sections that are missing, and such as that. Read your manuscript out loud and see if your words make sense. By doing this, you can avoid sentences like:

"XX is not to be killed in this encounter. If he is killed, he stops attacking and surrenders."

"If the PCs attempt to enter with weapons, the maitre d' will ask that they remove them three times."

If you have the resources, have a friend read the adventure for you, or to you. Your words may sound very different coming from someone else.

Playtesting

Playtesting is a required step in the writing process for RPGA scenarios, and a very helpful one. Ideally, you should playtest twice. The first playtest should be run off your outline, and should be run by you. This will show you where your outline needs a little work before you start writing. The second playtest should be run after the scenario is completed, and should be run by someone other than you. Ideally, by someone you don't know. If you are present, you should either sit back and watch, without speaking, or you should play one of the characters and try your hardest to break the adventure by throwing unusual actions at the game master. Don't use your knowledge of the scenario to try to break it, but you

can have your character take unusual actions without using your intimate knowledge of the scenario.

A playtest should uncover problems with your plot, such as big holes that you did not realize were there or situations where a simple spell or use of a power obviates an encounter you expected to challenge the players for an hour. Playtests also reveal where you need to add additional information. The second playtest especially shows where you need to add information, as your game master may be asking you questions or making things up during the game.

Submitting Your Scenario

Once your work is complete, you are ready to submit it to the RPGA. Scenarios are due six months in advance of the date on which you would like them to first be played. Exceptions are only granted under unusual circumstances, and must be requested in advance.

LIVING GREYHAWK scenarios must be submitted to HQ and to the Regional Reviewer for your triad at the same time. Further, a LIVING GREYHAWK scenario written for a specific region must be approved by the Triad governing that region before submission to the Regional Reviewer and RPGA HQ.

LIVING DEATH scenarios must be submitted to the LIVING DEATH Campaign Director and HQ.

To make a submission, follow these steps:

1. If you can, email the scenario electronic document from your computer to the Network. Check the website www.rpga.com for the correct email addresses. Scenario files should be compatible with Microsoft Word.
2. If you cannot email it, then put a printout of the scenario and a 3.5" disk in an envelope, addressed to RPGA Network Tournament Coordinator, P.O. Box 707, Renton, WA 98057-0707. Scenario files should be compatible with Microsoft Word, and the disk should be formatted for Windows/DOS machines.
3. All submissions must include a signed Standard Disclosure Form. You can acquire this form from your RPGA membership handbook or download one from www.rpga.com and print it out. Mail it to the address in step 2.
4. If you have maps or other graphical objects, print out a set of them all and mail them with your Standard Disclosure Form. If your electronic versions don't come through, we can scan the printouts. Use the best printer you have on the best setting you can, without going to the trouble of paying extra money for the printouts. Electronic map and graphic files can be sent with the scenario by email or on disk, but printed backups are also required. Graphics files should be in bitmap (BMP), TIF, or JPG formats.
5. The Network might not accept your submission. If you send things through the mail you want back if the scenario is rejected, include a self-addressed stamped envelope with enough postage to mail back what you would like returned. You can include instructions on what to return to you in a cover letter.
6. Cover letters should accompany the Standard Disclosure Form. They should contain information about the name of the scenario, how it was submitted or when (if by email), what other things you have included with your letter, and any instructions on what to return to you should HQ decline to accept your submission.

If you don't follow these steps, your scenario submission will be returned or discarded, depending on whether you have provided information on how to return it.

Payment

The RPGA pays for tournaments written using rules published by Wizards of the Coast. These include specifically D&D SAGA (DRAGONLANCE: FIFTH AGE), MARVEL SUPER HEROES, and ALTERNITY games. The Network does not pay for games written using rules that TSR used to publish, such as Boot Hill, Star Frontiers, or the old Marvel Super Heroes game. In return for this payment, RPGA assumes all rights to the tournament. This is not an option.

The RPGA does not pay for tournaments using games rules not published by Wizards of the Coast. Instead, we ask for a two-year exclusive use license, which is renewable afterward upon agreement by both the RPGA and the author(s). This license means that RPGA is the only distributor of your scenario for two years; even you cannot run it as an unsanctioned event at a convention. Sometimes the company that produces the game pays for the rights. Check with the game company in question for their policies in this matter.

The RPGA pays US $100 per scenario round, and an additional US $50 for tournaments for which characters are provided.

The RPGA pays US $100 per scenario round for Core and Adaptable LIVING GREYHAWK scenarios. RPGA pays US $50 for Regional LIVING GREYHAWK scenarios. This difference in rate is due to the potential audience that the scenarios are available to.