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The Four Foxes

v1.6.0

Chapter 1

The Four Foxes

... is a private detective agency that ran from 1923 through 1951.

The agency had some sort of “supernatural magnetism” that made every case an extraordinary one.

Four brothers, sons of a renowned explorer, ran the agency during its whole existence.

Differently from other games, where the focus is the scenario, here the focus is the four main characters. They were designed to complement each other and create some funny interactions between them. Besides them, there is a couple of family friends who can be also used to replace some of the brothers if the players want a different flavor.

This is also a diceless RPG, heavily inspired by Amber, Puppetland, Call of Cthulhu, and movies like Indiana Jones. The rules are simple (the book is very slim, after all), and aimed towards a fast investigative game. The characters appearance is purposely vague, feel free to add your colors and fill the blanks.

The characters in 1926

Moe Fox - “Grumpy Moe”

Moe is in his early 50s. He was never an action guy but always felt responsible for his brothers since their father disappeared.

Motto: “Nobody hits my brothers, but me!”

Can and can't

- Cannot win a fight, unless one of his brothers is in danger. If so, he cannot lose a fight as far as his opponent is human.
- Can clear fear, dizziness or any temporary mental condition from his brothers with a slap in the face or a punch.
- Immune to fear when smoking a cigar.
- Can sense danger or supernatural forces in a place or object. He can't say exactly what it is, but knows where and how bad it is.
- Can cast a small flame on his hands, as strong as a lighter.
- If shooting or throwing, he has the same precision of a drunk raccoon.

Important note: If the player forgets to say Moe is smoking, then he's not, meaning he's not immune to fear. Next time, try to not forget lit the cigar before pass through that creepy door.

**Larry Fox - “Bold Larry”
 (“Reckless Larry” according to his brothers)**

Larry is in his middle 40s. He's a natural explorer as his father, and besides his age, is the most physically capable of the brothers.

Motto: “Me first!”

Can and can't

- Can answer any question about ancient history or artifacts, or know where to find the answer given enough time.
- Can fight 2 or 3 humans bare hands and win.
- Never miss a shot or a throw, as far he has enough time to aim.
- Can swing on ropes, jump over huge gaps, climb over huge walls. No obstacle can block him unless it's a dead end.

- Cannot convince, coerce, or intimidate anyone.
- Cannot lie convincingly, no matter the consequences.

Sam Fox - “Cunning Sam”

Sam is in his late 30s. He’s the only real detective of the four brothers.

Motto: “It’s obvious, isn’t it?”

Can and can’t

- If sober and given enough time, can find anything odd on a place or situation. It’s always something relevant to the story.
- If sober and given enough time, can tell exactly what recently happened on a place.
- When sober, can tell if someone is lying and his or her feelings during a conversation.
- Can defeat any human opponent on a close combat, as far he’s drunk or if he can improvise a weapon. No matter how big or small is the improvised weapon, but it’s gonna break after the first use.
- Can jump, climb and escape any pursuer when drunk. Can do the same when sober, but usually he got badly injured in the end.

Lester Fox - “Smooth Lester”

Lester is in his middle 20s. The youngest brother is as *bon-vivant* as he’s good with people.

Motto: “Relax, ok? I have it under control.”

Can and can’t

- Given time, can convince anyone to do whatever he wants, as far it’s not obviously life-risking.
- Can lie as convincingly as telling the true. Maybe more convincingly than the true.

- Cannot win any fight, no matter how. But can talk enough to make the opponent hesitate for a moment, even if it's not human.
- When in a life-threatening situation, can run as fast as an olympic champion.
- Given enough time, can disguise himself as anyone he had time to study.
- Can sense danger if he's behind someone else.

The characters friends

Colonel George Lancaster - "Mr. India"

Mr. India is close to his 80s. He is a reformed colonel from the British army that served on India in the last century, he's also a good friend of the family.

Motto: "No, I'm not going to run. And yes, of course I can hit it!"

Can and can't

- Can hit anything he can see when using his faithful "elephant-killer" rifle. That gun is everything, except subtle, and it kills anything smaller than an elephant in one shot.
- On a quick glance, can notice spots he can shoot that prevent pursuers to reach him, usually making things fall, explode, or disarrange. That always causes other troubles soon or later, like paying for the damage, or hitting more than the intention.
- Cannot run, jump, or move any faster than a walk.
- Can recognize any damage made by any weapon and tell what caused it, how it was caused, and what kind of person could use a weapon like that. Also can tell a lot about any weapon he sees, even if completely alien to him.
- Can distract or entertain anyone with hunting stories, as far they are not attacking him. The listeners cannot leave his presence until he stops talking.

Lady Ching Shih - “Captain Shih”

Captain Shih is in her early 40s. She’s gorgeous, proud, and has a very strict code of honor. Also she’s a former very successful pirate and smuggler.

Motto: “I may know someone who knows him.”

Can and can’t

- When using her sword, can win a fight against four of five human opponents.
- Given time, can find criminal or political connections to anyone she knows the name. Also can tell if someone has no relevant connections.
- Cannot be seen in public without attract attention. That means trouble will find her if she stays at the same place for more than a couple of days.
- Cannot betray or abandon a friend, no matter the consequences.

Antonieta Rivas Salazar - “Madame Salazar”

Madame Salazar is close to her 50s. She is Romani (Gypsy), and a powerful medium.

Motto: “Gimme your left hand. I see... I see...”

Can and can’t

- Can scare anyone who understand her with a curse. Enough to make them hesitant in take any actions against her.
- Can tell what someone does or did for a living if she observes their hands and/or body movements for long enough.
- When using her crystal ball, can see glimpses of the next upcoming event, or the consequences if the group fails.
- Can invoke the dead to ask one and just one question. The answer will be true and honest. That soul can never be contacted again.

- Cannot make others than her friends fully believe her. Everyone always thinks she's not telling all the truth even when evidence is clear.

Important note: the Game Master can never remove or invalidate any trait, that's for players only. That means Madame Salazar will never have her crystal ball broken unless *the player* chooses so. On the other hand, the ball can be forgotten, temporarily taken, or just be nuisance depending on the situation.

Ms. Mary Sinclair - "Sister Mary"

Sister Mary is a young nun in her late 20s. Her faith is her shield, but she must resist temptation.

Motto: "Oh, Lord! Don't say that."

Can and can't

- If still a virgin, when praying with her eyes closed, will be completely ignored by any supernatural creature as she was not there.
- Given little time, can seduce any man or woman. They will do anything she asks for, even if it's risky.
- Can sense what sin tempts any living being she sees: lust, gluttony (that includes booze and drugs), greed, sloth, wrath, envy, or pride.
- Cannot hurt any of God's creation, man or animal, no matter if evil or not. Supernatural creatures are NOT created by her God and must burn in hell.

Important note: the Game Master can never remove or invalidate any trait, that's for players only. Which means that Sister Mary will never lose her virginity *unless* the player wants it to happen. On the other hand, seduced men and women can follow here around, act jealously, or just be overprotective.

Chapter 2

Rules

There are only two rules in The Four Foxes:

- *Can and can't*,
- Fear and damage.

It's a very lightweight system, but that means these few rules are really important.

Can and can't

You don't have attributes or dice. Everything different from an average human is in the *can and can't* list, as also as your limitations.

***Can and can't* are absolute**, if you *can* you can. Nothing will prevent you from doing that, not even the Game Master. The same for *can't*, if you can't do something, no matter what, you can't. The rules seem strict, but that makes the game fun.

As we have no dice, no danger comes out of the blue and kills your character instantly. The Game Master will always give you the picture, enumerate your options, and tell if you are going well or not (more ahead). So, please pay close attention to the clues the Game Master is telling you about how difficult things are.

Fear and damage

You might have noticed that there is no *Hit Points* here. Think of some combat video-games where the screen gets slightly red for a while and after some time it gets back to normal. Damage in The Four Foxes works the same way, if you keep receiving damage, you'll pass out. But take a break from it and you'll be fine.

From time to time, the Game Master will tell you that you'll be dizzy, drowsy, tired, limped, or something like that as consequences of your actions. That means the characters will not be at the peak of their abilities and that their *can and can't* will be somewhat affected for future actions.

That snowballs quickly, the worse the shape you are in, more likely it is for getting more conditions which affects your abilities.

Fear in The Four Foxes is as dangerous as damage, it can affect your judgement and your abilities the same way as a bullet. So, when the Game Master says "that's scary, you're afraid", be aware that your actions can lead to even more damage or fear, until you get incapacitated.

Fear is damage for the mind.

But fear is way more interesting than physical damage in game. Enough fear leads to insanity. So you can see and hear things that are not there, or you can be forced to fill small rituals to take action, like praying, or avoiding cracks in the walkway. Every time you ignore them, insanity increases, imposing even more complications.

Getting rid of fear and damage

Conditions can be light as being dizzy or severe as losing your arm. What you do to get rid of them depend only on the narrative. For dizziness, just a moment to catch your breath might be enough; for a lost arm, well... maybe you need to find a genius engineer who could replace it for a steampunk version of a cybernetic limb.

The important part here is that *damage is always narrative*, they are not numbers. Their consequences and healing are entirely dealt in game.

Chapter 3

Diceless for Players

Maybe this will be your first game with no dice. If you are an experienced player, you might be wondering if your GM wouldn't have too much control over your character. Actually, that's exactly the opposite as you know what your character *can* do without failing and what he or she *can't* do, no matter what. The tricky part lies in between these two extremes.

So, here are only the two things you need to know, besides your character personality and the *can and can't* list:

1. Ask what your character thinks,
2. Pay attention to fear and damage.

Ask what your character thinks

You don't have your character abilities.

If your character is an experienced brawler, no one expects you (the player) to evaluate an opponent by yourself just based on the Game Master's description. That's not only unfair, but impossible. Even if you *are* an experienced fighter, the description will never be complete and detailed enough to allow you to judge by yourself.

Just ask "do I think I can handle him?" and the Game Master will give you an accurate picture of what to expect and maybe some options. Your character is also an investigator, which very few of us are in real life, so a

common question is “**what do I think is worth noting here?**”, to which the Game Master will always answer pointing you to the relevant direction.

On the other hand, your character also have abilities in your *can and can't* list that you don't need to ask. For example, Larry is a very skilled hand-to-hand fighter, so you don't say to the Game Master “I'm going to throw a punch on his face”, you say “I just knock him out and throw him through the window”. The Game Master will redo the scene if that guy was something you couldn't handle that easily¹.

That also works for knowledge. If you are playing with Sam, who is a great investigator, when someone asks “What killed her?” you reply “I promptly say the answer!”. You don't need to check with the Game Master if the character knows the answer, it knows.

If you have played other RPGs before, that might sound strange. But that helps to keep the game pace. Just try it.

Always remember to say:

- *What do I think of it?*
- *I promptly say the answer!*
- *I just do it.*

Pay attention to fear and damage

That's how the Game Master tells you that the course of actions is not working. Your character is never going to die from a sudden explosion, but more likely die fighting a stronger opponent alone, ignoring all the increasing damage he's inflicting upon you. So, when the Game Master says “the rocks are still hitting you, and they're getting bigger”, that means you need to do something different, and do it fast. Some situations are really dangerous and there is no way to get out of it without some damage, it's a matter of choosing the “lesser evil”. And that's a big part in an horror/investigative game.

¹To the Game Master: don't redo the scene, if you let that pass it's because you haven't described that guy in a way the player got doubts. Just let the player throw him through the window and come with another thug later, but with a better description

Instead of being a result of randomness, fear and damage in The Four Foxes are tools for the Game Master to help you without breaking the game pace or the narrative.

How do I know something is difficult without numbers?

Like in real life, there is two ways to assess how hard something is:

1. You evaluate it using your experience. Meaning you ask the Game Master what your character thinks of the situation.
2. You try it by yourself. Meaning your character jumps into the situation and keep an eye on how the outcome is going, that's usually means pay attention to *damage*, more often than not.

There is no numbers on a sheet you can compare, so you need to make you character experiment their limits as safely as possible.

The best example here is combat. You know Larry can handle 3 or 4 humans and win, but what about that beast running towards him? You need to test! Say that you will engage combat the most defensively way you can, trying to assess how strong the beast is. The Game Master will tell you how strong, or weak, it is depending on how much damage you're exchanging. If you suspect you can get in deep trouble, try to have a clear escape route or a plan B when doing that.

Just like in real life.

Chapter 4

Diceless for Game Masters

A diceless game is not difficult, but you don't narrate it as your usual RPG. The most important thing is to let your players clearly know what are the consequences of each action *before* they act.

Let me repeat that:

Tell the consequences **before** they act.

If you don't do that, then the Game Master has too much power, you decide every outcome, which is great for a book, but defeats the purpose of having players making decisions. Always remember that they are the heroes, the very heart of the story. Let them shine.

To help you out, I have put the essentials of game mastering a diceless RPG below. Of course, follow them is up to you, but I strongly advise you to start there and then adapt the guidelines to your own play style after you get a grip of them.

Game Master guidelines

Here is your agenda as a Game Master of The Four Foxes, by order of importance:

1. Describe consequences *before* commit the action
2. Let the players have the control
3. Always answer "yes, you can"

4. Sometimes answer “yes, you can. But...”
5. The world doesn’t stop as players talk
6. Snowball fear and damage

Describe consequences *before* commit the action

When players tell you what they are doing, if it’s risky, tell the possible consequences and ask again: “is that ok?”

The outcome of actions should never surprises the players.

This is the *most important rule*, especially if the player have that character for the first time.

From time to time, players are not going to ask what they intend to do. They’ll just say they are doing it. Don’t cut the players unless it’s too out of the fictions (“I fly to the next building”). If what they do is just above average, of it’s on their *can and can’t* list, say “That’s perfect!”, and move on.

That helps to keep the game pace and, more often than not, will give you ideas for the game.

More about that on “Let the players have the control” ahead.

Example:

Lester can’t fight at all. So this is how to handle the situation when the players really wants to go physical with him.

Lester - “I’m going to jump, I want to grab him.”

GM - “You cannot fight. Probably you’re going to miss him and hurt yourself a bit. What’s your intention? To prevent him from fleeing?”

Lester - “Nah...I just want to delay him if possible. So my brothers can catch him up.”

GM - “Even if that hurts?”

Lester - “Yeah, as far as I can create some advantage for the others, I’m ok.”

GM - “That’s fair. You jump trying to tackle him, but that was a bit clumsy and you hit your chin on his knee, got dizzy and slowly let him go. That

was not enough for stopping him, but your brothers are now way closer than before. Oh boy...your head is spinning!”

Let the players have the control

The Four Foxes is all about the characters being the stars and keep the pace.

Encourage the players to just describe the outcome of their actions when they are in their *can and can't* list.

If Lester is trying to deceive someone, say to the player “You are really convincing! This fellow is going to do anything you say, so what does he do?”.

More important, let the players build the plot.

If Sam is investigating a body and asks what killed the person, reply with “You tell me!” and get whatever the player throws at you and run the game with it. If the player said it was a bullet, so you now have a gun somewhere. If it was poison, then someone bought or made it.

After a while these inputs make the game run by itself. You don't need to ask yourself what to do next, because the players had that answer for you way before you need it.

Always answer “yes, you can”

The characters are the heroes and are way above normal people, so the default answer is always “yes” and the action is always a success.

Example:

The characters are in an alley and the player asks “is there a bottle here?”, the answer is *yes*.

Madame Salazar get a rock and throws at the guard pursuing her. She has no “can” or “can't” regarding that, so the player asks – “Can I hit him?” – the answer is *yes*. But then, tell the player the consequences before the action is committed: “GM - You're not that strong, so the guard is probably just lose balance and get delayed a bit, also, she's going to get angry and catching you will become personal. Is that ok?”

Sometimes answer “yes, you can. But...”

The characters have “cant’s” on their list, so if the player attempts something the character can’t do, tell how that is going to fail. The consequences are never terminal, this is not a game characters die unless their players want to do so. Dead is always intentional. Fear and insanity, on the other hand, are not.

The world doesn’t stop as players talk

This is another guideline to keep the game pace.

No matter if they are talking in or out character. Every minute or so you must interrupt them and tell that the world is moving.

That can be their pursuers getting closer; or they hear, smell or sense something interesting; maybe someone enters the room and drops dead. The world is not going to wait for them.

In moments of tension, don’t let them coordinate their actions.

After one or two phrases between them, tell the cultists are getting closer, then dangerously closer, and finally that they engage in combat. As a rule of thumb, give two warnings and then strike. If you want the players on their toes, give just one warning and then strike. The trick here is to be consistent, if you start with two warnings, keep two until the end of the game; if you start with one, keep that. Optionally, be very explicit when you change the pace, say – “Things are way more dangerous now” – and then use just one warning.

From time to time, the players will be in fierce combat or in a place you want to picture as dangerous. In those situations *any pause to debate means damage*. There is no time to talk, that’s why those situations are dangerous (and exciting).

Examples

The brothers are fleeing from some cultists and they got cornered on a cliff.

GM – “You are being hunted by those cultists. You can hear them shouting.”

Moe – “We should jump, we are not going to die.”

GM – “Probably not, but you can break a leg or an arm, and that will

surely ruin your cigars.” (Here the GM is telling the consequences before they commit to action)

Moe – “Hmmm... I don’t like that. Hey, guys. I can fight if you do.”

Lester – “I’d rather run. Can I disguise as one of the cultists?” (The player is asking something Lester would know, but the he, as a player, is unsure)

GM – “Yes, but you need time you don’t have. Unless you think something you can do to buy time. By the way, the cultists are getting too close, you can see them coming. You have seconds before they reach you.” (Here the GM uses *yes, but...* Also, don’t let the players forget the cultists are moving)

Larry – “How many of them? I can handle some myself.” (More questions about something Larry would surely know)

GM – “I would say 10 or 12, it’s difficult to see in the dark. You think it’s a bit too much for you alone. They are almost upon you.”

Larry – “Ok. Guys, let’s go fight?”

Moe – “I’m down!”

Larry – “That can create a distraction, so I can disguise myself.”

GM – “Indeed.”

Sam – “I don’t know, I’m out of booze. I’d rather try the cliff.”

Lester – “Hmmm, I think it’s...”

GM – “The cultists reached you, and they start fighting. They have no weapons but they are strong. All of you are defending and throwing punches. What do you do?” (Here the GM interrupted the players. A tense situation doesn’t allow coordination or too much elaboration. Throwing the combat and not allowing them to coordinate keeps the tension as it should be.)

Snowball fear and damage

Fear and damage are narrative, but they also affect *can and can’t*.

That means a broken arm prevents Larry from escaping. Being dizzy makes impossible for Lester to run as fast as usual. More important than that, actions under fear and damage create more fear and damage.

Create a snowball, when the character is afraid, say the consequences of the

actions are worse than normal. Any option should create more damage and fear unless it's something really safe to do, like stopping to take breath. Even so, if the character is being pursued, that can be a bad idea.

That helps to increase tension.

When the players keep going and the damage is too high, they end up passing out. Don't kill them, killing is extremely boring for a RPG. Capture them, let them pass out and wake up chained; attach their legs to iron balls; drug and release them in the middle of the city. Be creative, but remember, they are still the main characters of the story. They'll rise again.

Snowball fear and damage, until you can really hurt them.

Combat

The main focus of the game is the investigation and pushing the plot forward, so combat is just a mean to that end. Given that, they are fast and quickly resolved, don't expect a combat to lasts more than a couple of minutes. A very important combat should last no more than five minutes. A trivial combat should be solved in one or two.

So, what are the goals for a fight?

The first one is to **present more clues**. A defeated opponent can be interrogated and move the plot forward. Losing and being captured can reveal information about the ones causing all the trouble or even reveal where is their lair. A quick combat can reveal opponents strong and weak points, so you can defeat them easier later.

Second, it's a way to **create pressure and speed up** players. If some nasty creature is approaching them, there is no time for a detailed analysis on the corpse, they need to fight or run. To be honest, a combat might not be the best way to do that; any kind of approaching danger would probably work as good as a combat. But if they are a bit slow in progressing the plot, that's a good opportunity to give everyone more clues.

[Ronie: There is one important thing missing here, when the combat is the goal itself, like capturing the villain, or making sure everyone is safe. But I'm not sure how to write that exactly.]

Finally, every combat is **an opportunity for the players to roleplay between them**. Depending on the character or the opponent, there is no

way to win alone. So the characters must create solutions or play with their strengths and weaknesses.

Example

Sam - "I'm going to hit the closest cultist with my rock."

GM - "Ok, the rock is not going to last long, but it'll do for a while. What do you want to do? Kill them? Just knock them out? Hold them to give time to Lester?"

Sam - "Do I think we can defeat them?"

GM - "You have seen a lot of brawls and you're pretty sure you can beat them, but not without a lot of fatigue and some broken bones."

Sam - "Ouch! Lester, can you do something?"

Lester - "I guess I can trick them if they think I'm one of them."

GM - "That works."

Sam - "Ok, I'm just holding my ground, but making a lot of trouble to call their attention."

Larry - "I'm with Sam."

Moe - "I'm going to lit my cigar to cancel the fear and join the fray."

GM - "You're in a hurry, but you got your cigar lit. Are you all buying time for Lester?"

Larry - "Yes."

GM - "Ok, you are more interested on keeping them looking at you than really knock them out. That works really well, however, they are slowly pushing you towards the cliff. Lester, your move."

Lester - "I'm going to reach the cultist who is behind the others and hit him hard." (Lester can't win a fight, but the cultist are not really fighting him. Also, don't throw sand on a good plan.)

GM - "What do you want to do? Kill him?"

Lester - "Nah, I want his robes."

GM - "No big deal. Everyone is paying attention to you brothers, so it's easy to sneak behind one of them. You have you robes and a guy laying on the ground."

Lester - "I'm going to kick him over the cliff."

GM - "Done. He's passed out, nobody really noticed you. However, guys, you are dangerously close to that cliff."

Moe - "Kid, whatever is your plan, it's better to do it now." - to the GM - "I'm going to press them a little harder."

GM - "A little dangerous, but you got some ground at cost of some bruises."

Lester - "I'm running away the cliff and ..."

Moe - "I'm gonna kill you, brat!"

Lester - "Let me finish! And I'm going to shout to the cultists - 'Brothers! Forget those intruders, the Beast will take care of them, let's return before it reaches us too!'"

GM - "Ahhh... good call. You saw the Beast on a cage before. The cultists hesitate for a moment."

Lester - "You know the Beast will kill us too if it got us here!" - to GM - "I'm bluffing, I had no idea what that Beast does."

GM - "It's a fair assumption. The cultists start to retreat, you can sense they are on the verge of panic."

Lester - "Nice!"

Moe - "Good job, kid!"

Lester - "Don't call me that!"

GM - "You hear a howl at distance. Pretty sure it's not a dog. What are you doing?"

Game pace

Investigative games are slow. Give time and a player will tell you the character is "searching every corner, tapping on everything, looking closely to whatever is out of place." And actually there is nothing there, so you tell the player "nothing here". Then he searches the next room...

When running this game, try to keep the pace. Don't let them stop for long. If the players are discussing too much or spending too much time on a scene, create pressure making the world move.

Examples

- *The players are discussing which clue to follow for the past 3 minutes.*
GM - “Lester, you noticed someone in the corner. You’re sure the same person was observing you yesterday. You can tell because she’s quite attractive so she got your attention. What do you do?”
- *The players are still searching for clues and you already gave everything that was there.* GM - “Folks, you see 6 men coming towards you with scimitars. They don’t look happy. What are you doing?”
- *The players are debating if there is a trap or not for the past minutes.*
GM - “Ok, as you are examining the artifact, the temple starts to shake. Rocks fall over your head, hurting a little bit. What will you do?”
- *The players are still pressing a NPC for the past 3 minutes.* GM - “You’re talking to the Captain when a man in a stripe suit enters the room, opens his mouth and fall forward, dead with a knife in his back.”

More often than not, the players just don’t want to miss anything. Don’t stall the game yourself, *give everything* and move on. Keep more scenes coming!

Example

Sam - “I want to search the room for anything else that catches my attention.”

GM - “Cool! Sam is very experienced investigating and never misses anything important. You search not only the room, but give a good look in the whole house. Whoever attacked this man was invited to enter by the front door. There is no signs of forced entry anywhere, no signs of fight, and that door is unlocked. You’re sure it’s someone the victim knew well, because he died late night and no one invites a strange into the house that late.”

That’s it. Don’t stall the game and don’t let the players do the same. With every clue, there are more questions and more scenes coming. That will keep everyone on their toes and a 2 hour game will cover a complete investigation.

Creating a case

RONIE: This section is going to be overhauled. I'm going to borrow some ideas from "The book of lenses" and "Technoir".

Every game is focused on a case. Ideally, the case start and finishes in the same session. Here we give you tips and tricks to create the case and keep it interesting.

You're going to need 3 things for a case:

1. The culprit
2. The events
3. The scenario

Culprit

Every investigation needs a culprit, even if not necessarily a villain. The players need to discover who is causing the mess, and eventually capture them, or throw sand in their plans.

In a simple game, you have just one culprit acting alone. If you want something more complex, create two culprits and give them conflicting objectives.

You can think of a group as culprits too but every evil group must have a mastermind.

First think that person's goal. Here some examples in no particular order.

- Invoke a god/entity/dead person
- Get advantage over a rival
- Incriminate someone
- Revenge!
- Have a *coup d'etat*

A good goal have several steps to be completed. A murder is an excellent step but a poor goal because it's too sudden. If you want to play a typical

murder mystery, the goal is “to derail the investigation”, or “to hide herself”, and the murder itself is just the first step.

After you have the goal, think of someone. You need an evocative description, something that can help the investigators. If the culprit is doing the job itself, distinctive characteristics will lead to clues. For example, someone really tall, or too small, will have interesting footprints. Or maybe the angle from which the blade came will give you that.

Strong, weak, thin, fat, big head, small foot, one arm, red lipstick, white hair, a wig, a scar, calloused hands. . . Just choose one.

Then fill the details. The remaining description in few words, a name, and that’s it.

A mastermind could be someone less impressive, but it’s going to help if their minions have a distinctive mark. Like paint the walls with blood, use a specific and rare weapon, be all bald, have same same tattoo, and so on. Choose something and stick to that.

Why that?

Because that makes a very good first clue, or maybe second. It gives the players a way to distinguish between witnesses and possible culprits. If the murderer is supposed to be tall, that little frail old lady is just a witness. But, if the murderer is someone small and weak, that old lady will immediately be the suspect.

Without that, *every NPC* will immediately be in the suspect list. The players will have too many of them to make sense of what’s happening.

Finally, you can add a motivation. Why the culprit wants to fulfill the goal? That can add some flavor and give ideas for clues, but it’s not strictly necessary.

Examples

Jack Smith is the **strong gardener** of the Wellington Manor with **calloused hands** who murdered his boss, Lady Wellington. His goal is **to slow down the investigation** until he can flee from the country.

Miriam Meredith is a **small children** who wants **to invoke Hastur** to *revive her parents*.

Hassam Habab is a **skinny** Cairo guide, who wears *bright colorful clothes*,

and wants to *be the only guide to the pyramids*.

Events

With a culprit and the goal in mind, think of five steps they need to reach that objective. These steps are going to happen if the players don't interfere. Keep them a bit generic, so you can adapt during the game. For example, instead of *poison Detective Whitaker*, it would be better *poison someone who becomes a threat*. Instead of *sacrifice her brother at the library*, think of *sacrifice someone close*.

Try to make them independent, if one step needs another to be completed, when the investigators prevent one from happening, the following events will have to be modified in a hurry.

For example: instead of *trap the investigators in the pyramid*, so the culprit can *release the mummy to pursue them*. Use the same steps, but if they don't enter the pyramid, release the mummy anyways.

Each event needs some preparation, which means you need to give the players clearly clues of what's going to happen, but skip the details of *how* it's going to happen. Or, give the how, but don't tell what's going to happen.

Taking the example of the pyramid, make someone talk in the camp how it's dangerous without a guide, and how people get lost inside, just to be found dead by the next group of tourists. Tell the players that people from other expeditions have reported a mummy has attacked them on a red moon night. These small clues can trigger some preparation, research, or investigation. What causes a red moon? How people get lost in the pyramid?

Finally, when the players see the signal coming, they will know trouble is coming and the tension will raise. Like when they enter the pyramid, they know they will get lost; when they see the red moon, they know the mummy is going to kill the one who bears the death mark.

TK I've stopped here.

A great trick to keep the pace of the game is to have events happening at fixed intervals *in real time*. I've found the sweet spot for me is an event every 20 minutes. I recommend you start with that and adjust with experience.

Why a diceless game?

An investigative RPG is very different from the usual *Hack and Slash*. If you miss a hit on fight, you get some damage and everything else goes pretty much the same. It takes several bad moves for things to go out of rails. However, if you miss a critical clue on an investigation, that creates a lot of friction. Everything the players worked in the last minutes was useless, and they have to backtrack and try finding another clue.

Remove the possibility of failure and a clue is always worthy to pursue. The problem now is that some clues are better the others, but every single one of them will move the game forward. Instead of praying for the dice gods for a good roll, the players now need to choose which ones are more promising or that worth the trouble following. Choose correctly and you'll find the villain sooner and in a bad position. Choose poorly and you will find her well armed and waiting for the characters with a smile.

Chapter 5

Cases

RONIE: This section is going to be overhauled.

A night in the ship

Lester got some tickets for a one week cruise from “a friend of a friend”. It would be an excellent opportunity to relax after the stress of the last case.

You have embarked aboard the “Rising Star” in the late afternoon, and everything was running smoothly as silk. The ship had a casino, a theatre, several bars and games on the main deck.

Early in the next morning, the Captain summons you to the casino. When you arrived, you see the doors close, a small sign “under maintenance, sorry for the inconvenience”, and two big guys from the crew by each side. They introduce you to the big hall. The lights were dimmed, and the place was utterly silent, except by the voice of two men talking in the back.

When you arrived there, the Captain and their Safety Officer were talking. The Captain saluted you gravely and led you to a small room in the back, where a man from the crew was laying on the ground, beheaded. A pentagram was drawn on the floor, close to the body. His head, without the eyes, was carefully aligned in one of the vertices.

The Captain says: “We have a murderer here, and I think there will be more victims. I want to hire your services and your discretion”.

The game starts now.

- Captain: Joshua Albert (“Captain Albert”)
A stoic man on his 40s. Trustworthy and blatantly honest.
- Safety Officer: Richard Saint-John. (“Officer Saint-John”)
A tiny man on its 30s. Nervous, never looks at who he’s speaking.
- Crew member: the old Joe Rasca.
And old man with a big nose. He don’t want to be in trouble, leave me alone.
- Crew member: Molly Meister.
- Crew member: Mary Sinclair.
- Crew member: Carl Stephen.
- Crew member: Earl McMiller.

The grand bazaar

Mysteriously disappearing in Constantinople (Istanbul) 1927.

To be written...