

Roleplaying Plotting Styles

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When plotting a roleplaying game it is important to look at the big picture. There are only so many ways to actually plot your game, and it's important to understand the advantages and disadvantages of each of the basic styles. It's my intent to objectively present such an overview of plotting in this article.

Generally all styles for plot can be broken down to what I call : The Mission, The Onion, The Legend, The Arena, The Globe and The Spider's Web.

The Mission is a classic plot, usually with a linear path (or with a limited set of branches) where the characters are assigned, hired or engaged in achieving a specific goal for one or more authority figures. They are expected to cooperate together to achieve the goal, which often has greater repercussions. The mission may involve a rescue, a theft, a journey, an assault, defense of a location against an assault, delivery of goods, recovery of lost or stolen goods (or a particular item), capture of one or more fugitives or solving a crime. The Game Manager sets out the criteria, may provide a limited amount of intelligence for the players to work with and lets them decide the how to handle the mission.

The Mission may work on a carrot or a stick approach. In the case of the carrot the characters are motivated by personal profit, advancement or benefit to themselves or their loved ones. The Stick is trickier, and has the potential of backfiring on the Game Manager. It uses blackmail, threat of loss or entrapment, or threats to the people, things, and ideals the characters consider important. The easiest Stick to wield is to threaten the "End of the World" if the mission fails. The problem is that, if wielded truly, you have to carry out the threat if they fail.

The Mission is a limited form of plot, and although an entire campaign (or series of stories) can be built upon the mission structure, it is not always the most rewarding to either players or Game Managers. The Mission requires the Game Manager to think thru the entire plot, and most of the major scenes that will occur, and be able to follow any specific branch ways they design. It requires the ability to plot tightly, to be ready to compensate when the randomizing method doesn't flow evenly and when players are absent or their characters incapacitated or lost.

If the Mission is designed with too tight a plot, or is not sufficiently adaptable to events, and the players go in an unexpected way, it can die a horrible death. Alternatively, the Game Manager can try to improvise like crazy on the spot to keep everyone happy - not always successfully. If this does not happen the Mission has limited results - either the characters Succeed or Fail, with the occasional Pyrrhic Victory.

The Mission also does not open itself well to character development and player control. This means that the players may feel they are being railroaded, and when that happens they become disgruntled. The tighter the plotting the less power the player has in regards to the game. Too tight, and the result can be a train wreck off a cliff.

Many new and inexperienced Game Managers pick the Mission plotting style for a scenario or campaign precisely because it gives them the most control. Learning to handle player input gracefully can be difficult. It requires skill with improvisation, quick thinking and effort to resolve player choices while maintaining consistency. Because the Mission allows the Game Manager more control over how and when player input occurs, it provides a good structure for learning how to do this.

The Mission also has the advantage of being good for a modular game, one that has defined time and space barriers, such as a convention demonstration or a series of sequential storylines that simply feature the same group of characters. This can be found in many book series from the 30s thru early 60s (James Bond, Sherlock Holmes, 60s/70s TV action series...). The characters remain, as does the familiar territory of their missions, only the plot / current crisis changes from week to week.

The problem of course is these forms generally assume the characters do not grow or change, just the current plot events, and that upon success everything returns to 'Normal'. This is only satisfying if one is invested in maintaining the status quo, whereas many gamers would prefer to change the world for the better, or at least see their own characters change and grow. Most roleplaying games are based upon character development, advancement, experiences and refinement. They are much more like real life than the literature and media forms associated with the Mission. Thus, the Mission is not good for really long campaigns with complex and deep characters. It's better for limited characters and campaigns, or even characters that will be played once and never again in a one-shot. Many players prefer a game with more potential than The Mission provides.

The Onion is a more sophisticated plot method. It can start as a mission or a random event (drawing even literally from a random encounter table), but is purposely designed with a twist. As the characters move into events and complete or lift away a section of the plot they discover that things are neither as linear nor as black and white as in a classic mission, indeed, there is more going on than first appearances would indicate. Once the players discover this, a wider range of possibilities is available to them. They can take a variety of paths, choose to abort the mission, turn on the authority figure, discover other motives behind those that are originally apparent, or change the course of events purposely as well as accidentally.

Onions are often designed to include intrigue, betrayals, missing need-to-know information, lies, or unexpected additional complications (such as rivals or enemies in competition to achieve or prevent the player's goal). The GM still must plan a lot of things ahead, including many major scenes, but does not necessarily know which path the story will take or how it will finish. With the Onion there should be a number of end results waiting rather than just the success or failure of the initial goal.

The Onion takes more work than the Mission to set up, and depends more on player choices and decisions, giving them more 'wiggle room' as to where things will go. It also allows more character development, although only within a limited range. It adapts better to character loss or player absence. Since the characters have more freedom, it is easier to find in game reasons for their absence. Also, a Game Manager familiar with how Onions play out will not assume that a character with a specific ability, piece of knowledge, skill or personal interest will be present, survive, or will choose to share their knowledge with the party.

A common way for a GM to start an Onion is to set forth 2 or more separate plots. Although it may not be apparent at first, these plots intertwine. For example, information from the "B" plot may reveal the hidden twist in the "A" plot. Or they may come together at the story conclusion. Players may ignore one or the other, focus on both at the same time, or split forces to deal with each (equally or unequally).

Sometimes the GM will even add more than 2 layers to an Onion, creating more than one twist, or a series of villains who are "really" behind the problem the players want to solve, or more than two plot strands. The depth of the Onion is only limited by what the GM believes they, and their players, are capable of handling.

The Onion also requires that the characters become invested in solving the overall problem, not just completing the initial Mission, or resolving the first situation. For the players this means they must be willing, at times, to take action, rather than simply reacting to events. The GM, on the other hand, may need to work harder to engage the players in the plot and game world (Although, for some players, the chance to make significant choices acts as incentive.)

Another way the Onion requires more work from the GM is in the creation of a large cast of characters - all the probable major supporting and opposing characters for each of the plot lines started. And the GM must be willing to accept that the players will not necessarily follow a particular plot, or meet a particular character associated with that plot.

If the plot depends on a mystery, the GM should be careful to ensure that there are multiple ways to find the facts that lead to the next level of the onion. Otherwise the players will become frustrated or give up on the plot entirely. Doing this, while not simply dropping the facts into their lap, is tricky, and requires flexibility

from the GM both in planning and in play.

Since the players have more control in the Onion, it requires more skill with improvisation from the GM. A good GM can prepare for this, by creating a large cast of characters and many avenues by which vital information can reach the players. Essentially this gives the GM a larger map to work with, larger than one would have in the Mission, but does not, ultimately prevent the players from wandering off it. Like the Mission, this can end in disaster, although the flexibility of the plot helps prevent such problems.

If done correctly, as in all plot driven games, the players in the Onion will feel clever, accomplished and effective by the wrap up(s) of the plots involved. If done wrong, the Onion can collapse into chaos or party disaster or seem too easy, falling into an anti-climax that leaves folks feeling unaccomplished or unsatisfied.

The Legend is a plot that is based upon the personal background, goals, and history of a character. It requires the Game Manager to choose which character to exploit as the focus of the story, and is often less team oriented than a Mission or Onion. The targeted character may be facing a dark secret from their past, a forgotten enemy, a responsibility to a relative or loved one, suffering the effects of their actions in a previous storyline, or be given an opportunity (with complications) to achieve a stated life goal.

One problem with trying to run a Legend plot is you need a game mechanic and setting that allows players to design complex and detailed characters. If the mechanics are too light, too flimsy or do not cover concepts of social interaction and background well then it can be very difficult to find a hook to use for a Legend plot.

Sometimes the GM can get around this, if the campaign has been running for a long time, by using events that develop in-game. However, the "hook" events used to create a Legend must have the potential to produce long term consequences or returning problems. In some games nothing like this has happened - and neither the GM nor players can force it to happen. If no in-game hooks exist, the GM must rely on hooks from character generation (and have a mechanic and setting that encourages them). However, if the potential exists, an in-game Legend can be one of the most satisfying scenarios to run.

The advantage of the Legend is that it will get the interest of the targeted character to the extreme, and thus their player. They suddenly have center stage in what is going on, and often need to make a big set of decisions that will affect the outcome of the game. Additionally the player can't claim you're "picking on them" since it was something they decided to take or add to their character's background, or an action they chose to take with their character in-game, that is driving the story. If they didn't want to have to go and rescue their old mentor then they shouldn't have included loyalty to said mentor as part of their character design.

A disadvantage to watch out for is that if there is not enough for the non-targeted characters to do, or reasons for them to be involved in the story, it can crumble from player boredom or jealousy. Even if this is avoided, you may create an expectation among the players that another Legend story will come up soon that will focus on their character in a similar manner. If Legend stories focus too often on the same character players may begin to believe that there is some favoritism going on. If a particular character is frequently passed over, that player may believe they are being ignored (sort of the opposite of favoritism).

It is also important not to make a Legend plot too linear (like The Mission) but to it should resemble the Onion in its potential for multiple results. Players in a Legend plot that is too linear will feel that they have been cheated or railroaded. The secret of the Legend is that the choices of the targeted character are essential, and there should be more than one important choice for the best effect.

Legends can be used to create an entire campaign by rotating the focus from one player character to another. You can also use Legend plot lines interspersed with Mission plot lines, or as one of the plots in an Onion (if your Onion twist is based on multiple plots). The Legend also makes a wonderful fix if you have a player who is bored or uninvolved in the game.

The Arena is a common plot concept, where the players are rivals or outright enemies in competition with each other for the same goal. This plot style is often used in Live Action Roleplaying Games, and in games of extreme intrigue (such as 'Amber' or some 'Vampire the Masquerade' games).

In a simple Arena style game there is a prime goal, or prize, which the characters compete for. In more complex versions, each character has its own goal. These goals may or may not be in direct conflict, but they are rarely completely compatible. As such, alliances are, by nature, temporary. Goals may be assigned, chosen by the player, or even decided last minute on a whim.

Unlike a full blown Mission the Game Manager doesn't have to build a complex full blown and scripted plot. Nor is a collection of sub-plots (as in the Onion), required. The plot is provided by the player characters interaction with each other. Arenas use very few Game Manager operated Supporting Characters. The Game Manager is more there to help keep the flow going, referee the actions of player character upon player character, and ensure world consistency with their actions.

The problem with The Arena is that the Game Manager has little control. The players are all at each others throats in intrigues, violent actions, crimes and misdemeanors. Extensive note keeping of the ongoing events is needed to track all the changes, backstabs, alliances and trades which occur. And the ending can never be predetermined. It's possible for everyone to kill their characters off, for no one to reach their supposed goals, or for nothing at all of import to happen because of extreme paranoia among the players.

Additionally many players balk at or downright loathe the Arena, since it is not a cooperative environment (unlike The Mission or The Onion). It's a highly competitive environment, which some folks don't like. Of course, some players must enjoy these sorts of games, or they wouldn't happen... Also, as with the Legend, there can be balance issues. Often the loudest, boldest or most manipulative person will come out on top and leave the other players unhappy or unwilling to continue in the long term. Finally, Arena story lines are rarely "great stories." They are too disorganized, broken up in regards to point of view and value of result.

The Globe bears some semblance to the Arena, but is wider in scope. Like Shakespeare's theater the entire world, and all the actors upon it, is the stage.

In this set up, the GM creates the world and leaves it up to the players to instigate the plot based upon the desires of their characters, whatever those might be. Perhaps the characters need money, so they devise a heist to do so, or a swindle, or a theft, or an intricate plan to act as merchant adventurers, or they go into the shipping trade, or offer to hire themselves out as an acting troupe, or try to buy a treasure map, or perhaps invent a new magical device which they can market to the rich and famous. Or maybe someone wants to seek revenge on whoever killed their father, or seek out love and romance, or visit someplace that's on the map but where no one they've met has ever been, or find a unicorn to ride, or gain a reputation as a highwayman, or overthrow the monarchy and set up a republic, or whatever.

In the Globe the Game Manager designs and micro-designs the setting as needed, adding in colorful characters and scenery and letting the players guide the majority of the plot. Unlike The Mission, or The Onion, or even The Spider Web, the Game Manager doesn't lay out actual plots for the most part, although the GM can insert 'interesting twists' so the effects of the player's actions are not always predictable.

The Game Manager has little control in The Globe, beyond the mechanics and the previously established setting material. The players control much of what occurs. If a player decides they want to become a God, then it is possible for them to work towards that goal (and the Game Manager must be ready to deal with the possibility that they will succeed, no matter what hurdles are in the way). It's not as easy a form of plotting as it appears at first glance, and requires a Game Manager that can improvise drastically. At times it will resemble a game that has wandered off the map. And it always resembles a game which has been hijacked by the players, since that's essentially what it is.

The Globe also requires constant record keeping to ensure consistency. Lack of consistency is the number one way for a Game Manager to cause players to lose their 'suspension of disbelief' in the game world, and The Globe is especially sensitive to this. It is ill suited for short term or limited time concept games,

as the globe should continue to spin, to allow new actors (characters) to enter and leave the stage, and generally to have a number of ongoing stories occurring at the same time.

Globes can be cooperative, but also can end up competitive, depending on the disposition of the players and their characters. It really doesn't favor either of these styles of play. It does depend on players who are willing to take action. If the players don't instigate a plot, than the game dies a horrible death from boredom.

The Globe can be very rewarding for players, since it focuses on their actions, their choices, their ideas, and their ability to move events forward, but can be frustrating for GMs who aren't able to think well on their feet, track information or adapt to ideas that appear from nowhere.

The Spider's Web requires a lot of work on the Game Manager's part, but can be very rewarding in regards to long term play. The Game Manager extensively works on the setting material, interweaving a wide collection of plot hooks and possibilities for characters to run into, and simply lets the player's run amok among the strands until they find one that interests them and follows it.

The Spider's Web can incorporate elements of The Mission, The Onion and The Legend (with the character's own background forming part of the web of possible plots), and even The Globe (in that it is much like a Globe with plot hooks added), but it should rarely include The Arena plot style. The Arena often makes predetermined plots ephemeral and insubstantial in the course of events.

The other way to think of the Spider's Web is as a minefield the characters are crossing. Sooner or later they will wander into a "mine", and there's the plot. It requires a creative Game Manager, willing to put many hours of time into preparation and organization of a wide collection of notes and ideas. Additionally a Spider's Web requires a "cast of thousands" in regards to non-player supporting characters who may be encountered, become involved/entwined in the character's stories, or have plot lines of their own that progress along side the player character's plots.

In a Spider's Web, the actions associated with one plot line that is encountered and explored can affect other plot lines that have been laid out by the Game Manager. Additionally there is often a complex path of cause and effect, so that action X may cause Non-Player Support Character Z to react differently towards the player's character because of their reputation, while Non-Player Character Y may now be trying to hunt down the character for their actions (unseen and unexpected until they attack). And action X may have caused localized inflation that means the price they will be paying at the Inn will be much higher than what they paid the last time they stayed there.

The Game Manager running the Spider's Web has more control than one running The Arena or The Globe, but far less than in a Mission or basic Onion. Generally the Game Manager has a collection of plot hooks and information planned, but does not actually have any set plans on where the plot will go or be resolved, leaving that to player creativity.

A Spider's web will fail if the players are insufficiently creative, motivated and immersed into the game world, as they will keep looking for Game Manager guidance on what to do (expecting a Mission style linear plot) and not receiving it since there is no preplanned story line or conclusion. The Spider's Web in the right hands will feel more real to some players, less contrived and much more like experiencing their character's life. It gives a lot of player control in regards to events and development, and does not always have solid 'conclusions' to storylines like a Mission would.

It is possible for a Spider's Web to evolve over time and entwine into a combination with The Globe, as the players become more pro-active and instigate character motivated plots. When this happens you may end up with a truly Epic Campaign, one that can continue for decades if the GM remains fresh, creative and responsive to the players. Additionally a GM who keeps extensive enough records and is willing to share, may draw in the assistance of one or more of the players as a co-GM, where the players begin to help expand and build upon the framework designed by the original GM.