

Preparing Games

All GMs have different methods of preparing for games. Some can run games off the top of their head requiring little or no lead time but even these GM's prepare for games even if they're not sitting down at a table and writing things down.

Procedural vs. Inspirational

Two basic approaches to getting ready for games involve how the GM builds the rough structure of the game. A procedural approach means that the GM builds the game by thinking about what obstacles the PCs will face and then connecting them with a story. An inspirational approach means building the game from stories and then distilling the obstacles from the story.

There is a significant difference in these two approaches but neither is really superior to the other in terms of end results if the GM understands the inherent weaknesses of each and compensates for them.

Procedural preparation's usually leads to challenges that are better suited to the PCs. Tactical choices may play a prominent role in the game and great detail may go into game aids like maps and NPC stat blocks. The weakness to this approach is that the story can be an afterthought and the threads that tie challenges together may be weak or nonsensical. By recognizing this weakness the GM can compensate by making sure the story gets as much development as the mechanical challenges of the game.

Inspirational preparation is just the opposite. The GM may be thinking of interesting plot twists and turns but the mechanics of the challenges may not be fully developed. This can lead to major obstacles that the PCs cannot possibly defeat or that end far too soon ending in an anticlimax. Again, by recognizing this potential weakness it can be compensated for.

The Feel

RPGs tend to have an overall feel. They may be gritty and realistic, they could be epic hero stories, rollicking adventures or humorous. Starting GMs may not think about what the feel of the game will be and leave it up to the system and players to define. To a certain extent this may be fine but by encouraging a specific feel, the game is more centered and the story that emerges is stronger.

In preparing for a game the GM can work to strengthen a specific feel by paying attention to several factors.

The availability of resources and their type greatly effect the feel. When they are scarce,

the game will feel more dangerous threats are larger. The players have to be more careful. When resources are plentiful players do not have to focus on them and can concern themselves with other elements. The game often feels freer and more heroic.

The reaction that the world has to the PCs impacts the feel. If there are more friendly NPCs the feeling of the game is more heroic and can become more humorous. If NPCs are indifferent to the PCs the feeling becomes colder and harsher encouraging the players to act independently. If almost all the NPCs players will encounter are hostile, the feel becomes hard and gritty.

The difficulty of the challenges the PCs will face makes a difference in the feel. If the PC struggle with a few very difficult challenges, the feel is grim and dark. When the challenges are easier or they have low danger associated with them the feeling is lighter and more heroic. In some cases if the players can overcome a lot of challenges quickly, this also has a more adventurous feel.

What the players stand to lose greatly effects the feel. When balancing risk and reward, some games may just be about the PCs holding their ground giving a game a grim tone. When the PCs would lose very little even if they fail, the game can be more lighthearted.

The Goal

Each game session should have some kind of goal. It's best if the players have set their own goals but starting out in a game, the players may not know what they want their goals to be. Early on then, a GM may introduce goals to the players and get them to take them up. These are often simple, like acquiring more resources. As the players learn the setting, they may simply look for more of the same, so the GM should offer different goals to the players and see if they are interested in them.

When the players start to set more complex goals for themselves. The GM may break their main goal into smaller ones that can be achieved in individual play sessions.

Example: Our players are just starting out and they're not too tough. We don't want to give them anything they can't handle. Our main goal will be to retrieve a Kelrath arms shipment that was attacked by Chezbah and immobilized, a small number of friendly troops remains to secure the area but they need reinforcements.

Three Challenges

A challenge is a story obstacle that will be difficult for the player to overcome. Each challenge stands in the way of PCs reaching their goals. Challenges can be NPCs that oppose the PCs, survival challenges, technical challenges or other story elements that can stand in their way.

There's no hard and fast number of challenges the PCs can face in a session but three major challenges is a good number for the players to work through. These challenges can either be presented one after the other or at the same time. Not all challenges have to be same difficulty. Having several easier challenges and then a final challenge that is more difficult than the others can create a crescendo in the action.

When preparing a game session, brainstorm all the things that would stand in the PC's way and then pick three that sound the most interesting to develop.

Keep in mind that players are likely to move in different directions than you expect and may attempt to completely avoid or otherwise circumvent challenges prepared by the GM. This is where improvisation comes in. GMs frequently need to adjust to the actions of the players.

Example: Lets think of some of things that can go wrong.

- 1 Kelrath send reinforcements.
- 2 Someone else wants the shipment.
- 3 The shipment is the stage for a trap.
- 4 Rall 4 damaged but not destroyed.
- 5 Seeters attack because of carrion.
- 6 Shipment is boobytraped.
- 7 Kelrath are looking for the shipment.

Now the GM eliminates the ones that are too hard for the characters or problematic for the story line. He cuts out 1 because the character's probably can't handle twenty or more Kelrath Geetin and 3 Because it is contradictory to the rest of the obstacles.

Next he choses three that are the most interesting. He picks 4, 5, and 7. The characters are briefed on the mission. They are told that a shipment of Kelrath weapons was ambushed and that they are being sent to secure it. Kelrath forces are in the area and are looking for the shipment, they will be hostile, but they should be dispersed. The characters will have to sneak in and sneak out. Once they have gotten through the perimeter, they will find the troops they are reinforcing. As they enter the area, a badly damaged (extent of the damage should be determined by the character's ability, and vehicles such as tanks or E- Suits.) Rall 4 will attack. Once the Rall 4 is destroyed, the players can begin to secure the shipment, but the carrion attracts Seeters. The

Seeters will not be too much danger to those in armor. But if anyone is wounded, or armor is damaged, they can be dangerous. Then the character's must escape the Kelrath perimeter.

Choices

Players need the power to affect the course of the game by the choices they make. These may be moral, practical, intuitive or rational choices. Their nature can be of any type imaginable as long as it effects the course of the game for the PCs.

There can be many small choices the characters make during the game but as part of each main challenge there should be some kind of choice for the players to make.

A GM may feel the urge to have choices have a right and a wrong answer. When players are given these and they choose the wrong answer, the game can abruptly end. Unless the desire is for a very high stakes game, it is preferable for both choices to have differing consequences. The PCs may be able to foresee these consequences or they may have to choose blindly.

Each consequence could be a choice between two differing rewards, two different costs or possibly a pair of different rewards and a costs.

The Spotlight

In each game players should have the opportunity to be the focus of the game for a short period of time. The character getting the spotlight should get a chance to use skills, equipment or story elements that are special to them. Keep this in mind when thinking about the challenges.

Generate NPCs

Next create some NPCs for the characters to run into in the game. Not all NPCs need to have to be explicitly spelled out. Most NPCs can have average abilities. Even average characters can pose a challenge to advanced PCs in sufficient numbers. NPCs with higher than normal attributes and skills along with specialized equipment can provide major challenges to the PCs.

Beyond statistics, naming NPCs is very important for proper story immersion. For major NPCs, think about who the NPCs are, some may warrant a backstory.

It may be desirable to create NPCs that the PCs may never meet face to face but that command the other NPCs. Especially for these characters, it's important to at least partially understand their motives so their reactions to the PCs are more realistic.

Maps

Maps are useful for the players to understand where they are and the location and distance of things around them. Making maps available to the players reduces misunderstandings and increases the tactical options the players have. Because of this, when practical, the GM should try and provide a map for the players to use.

This book contains maps for the GM and players to reference. Making copies of these maps or printing them out is one way to easily provide maps for them.

In some situations, the GM may not want the players to have a full map available to them. In buildings that are unfamiliar, caves, safehouses and other unknown environments, the GM can have the players draw their own map from the GM's descriptions. This kind of map should be checked by the GM periodically to make sure the elements the players have already gone through are accurate enough so there aren't problems as more of the map is pieced together.

World Information

Take time to examine the situations you've imagined and compare it to the information about the world the players already have available to them. If this session contradicts what they already know, they will complain about it. Players need consistency so that they are able to imagine the world they are in. If you still feel a need to break with the existing world information that the players know, find a good reason for the changes. Even if the reason things are different are not explained immediately, they should be explained eventually. At the very least, acknowledge that there is difference from what they are used to.

The Session Sheet

To assist the in setting up a game session, a session sheet is provided on the next page. Not every box needs to be filled in and there does not have to be a specific order to filling it in. It may be best to fill in what comes to mind the easiest and then consider any open spaces and how they may be filled in.

The top row of boxes ask the GM to briefly write some of the overall concepts for the game. First the feel of the game is written down. This can be a guiding factor in how the session is put together. The second is the overall goal for this session that the GM will present to the players or one that the players have chosen for themselves. The third box is the overall reward the players can expect when they achieve the goal.

Next is three sets of four boxes. The first in these sets is a description of a challenge that stands in the player's way. What the players do with this challenge is up to them.

The next box is a brief description of a major choice the players face during this challenge. Then two possible consequences of these choices. A short explanation is all that is needed.

The player spotlight box is a place to record which players will have a special chance to shine during this challenge. A short description of how this challenge especially applies to them goes here.

Lastly the NPC box is a place to list names and short descriptions of NPCs that may be encountered during the challenge. There may be no NPCs involved in a challenge, only a few with little else than their name or the GM may need to attach extra sheets with stats for use during the game.

Session Sheet

Feel	Goal	Reward
Challenge 1	NPCs	
Player Choice Consequence 1 Consequence 2		
Player Spotlight		
Challenge 2	NPCs	
Player Choice Consequence 1 Consequence 2		
Player Spotlight		
Challenge 3	NPCs	
Player Choice Consequence 1 Consequence 2		
Player Spotlight		