

The Rumor System

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Why the Rumor System?

Let's face it. Planning your campaign as a game master is hard work. The harrowing idea of walking into a game with very little planned is nearly as nightmare-inducing as the concept that you could spend hours crafting and designing a world only to have your players completely ignore your quest line in favor of the goofy made-up-on-the-spot half-orc that they met at the town library.

One of the most difficult aspects to being a game master is planning campaigns where players are constantly invested and engaged in the story and world. The Rumor System was created to solve that problem, as it allows the players to determine the outline of the main plot so that the game master doesn't have to shoulder the entire burden. It also serves to inform the game master about the players' motivations so that they can continue to facilitate a mutually rewarding game.

No More Murder Hobos!

Game masters often complain about their players abandoning the quest in order to wander around seemingly aimlessly, indiscriminately stealing, killing, and sleeping in alleyways. i.e., "murderhoboing." The Rumor System addresses this issue by providing an opportunity for the players to share what motivates them. Most of the time, players "murderhobo" because they don't care about the story or plot of the game. They'd deviate because they lack motivation and buy-in to follow the plot (or perhaps the path isn't clear before them). The Rumor System lets the players decide what kind of game they want to play. Will it be a combat-heavy dungeon crawl? A twisting narrative of political intrigue? Both the rumor the players choose and the gossip they add to it reveals to the game master the players' inner motivations which will keep the players interested. Don't skip the gossip! It will help everyone feel involved in the creation of the story and invested in the world

Instructions:

1. On a small piece of paper or handout, the players each create a rumor consisting of three parts:
 1. A bad thing that is happening or is about to happen
 2. The place it is happening or is about to happen
 3. A reason why they **and their characters** care about it
2. The Game Master collects the rumors and then shares them anonymously with the players.
3. The players then vote anonymously to decide which rumor they want to pursue. They can vote for two rumors, including their own.
4. The Game Master announces which rumor received the most votes. In the case of a tie, the Game Master can initiate a runoff vote, merge the two rumors into one, or flip a coin.
5. Each player then creates an additional piece of gossip relating to the winning rumor. This can be either anonymous or public.
6. The Game Master designs the campaign based on the winning rumor and incorporates each of the additional pieces of gossip into the world to help give it life and substance.

Rumor Examples:

There is an ogre attacking the town of Meradethia each night and the mayor is paying a hefty sum of money to anyone that can put an end to it.

- Bad thing: Ogre attacking people
- Place: Meradethia
- Reason we care: A reward!

Children have gone missing from the towns near lake Bemi.

- Bad thing: Children are going missing!
- Place: Near Lake Bemi
- Reason we care: See bad thing.

There is an ancient and powerful sword hidden in the mountains of Warmatak, but guarded by the mountain itself.

- Bad thing: There's a powerful sword...and we don't have it.
- Place: Warmatak Mountain
- Reason we care: We want that sword!

In the next town over there is a hat shop that is going out of business and wants help with its next advertising campaign.

- Bad thing: The hat shop is going out of business.
- Place: Nearby town
- Reason we care: They are really nice hats made by a really nice person who shouldn't go out of business.

Gossip Examples:

There is an ogre attacking the town of Meradethia each night and the mayor is paying a hefty sum of money to anyone that can put an end to it.

- I heard that everyone in town sleeps during the day and is awake all night.
- I heard that the mayor is keeping a dark secret.

Children have gone missing from the towns near lake Bemi.

- I heard that the lake is infested with lobsters.
- I heard that the only children who have gone missing were disobedient to their parents.

There is an ancient and powerful sword hidden in the mountains of Warmatak, but guarded by the mountain itself.

- I heard that the sword is actually cursed, and the mountain is protecting the world from it.
- I heard the mountain is filled with ghosts of the dead adventurers who have sought the sword.

In the next town over there is a hat shop that is going out of business and wants help with its next advertising campaign.

- I heard the hat shop owner is actually from another dimension. A famulous dimension.
- I heard that a rival haberdasher has sabotaged the hat shop owner with a curse that makes the wearers of his hats smell like death itself, though they can't tell.

Rumor Notes:

The handouts and guidelines in this system are a starting place. Notice in the example rumor above: “There is an ancient and powerful sword hidden in the mountains of Warmatak, but guarded by the mountain itself.” The rumor doesn’t have a “bad thing” that would explicitly fit in the format of the handout, but it is still very clearly a motivating adventure hook for a team of adventurers. Good rumors have opportunity for obstacles, whether it is combat or interpersonal social conflict. Once players become familiar with the goals of the rumor system, game masters can simply hand a slip of paper to players and say, “Write a rumor.”

Facilitating the Rumor System, the game master can have the whole process occur before the game formally begins (even via email), or can have the players create rumors and vote during an initial session. The game master can incorporate the hearing and selecting of rumors into the world of the game, as in a bulletin board, or have the players choose the rumor followed by an inciting incident that sets the players on the path toward the rumor.

On Systems and Worldbuilding

The Rumor System should work in any role-playing game system or setting. It has been used with success in *Dungeon World* and *Dungeons and Dragons*, and should work in any story-based role-playing game. Rumors and gossip tie in perfectly with establishing new settings, as they can be seeds for entire locations. A gossip of “I heard everyone in the town sleeps during the day and is awake all night” can lead toward settings that include strange curses, vampires, or a ruthless factory baron that makes the citizens work around the clock until they pass out from exhaustion. In the words of playwright Charles Mee: “Tie a string to something and see where it takes you.”



About **Game to Grow**

Game to Grow, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, offers weekly therapeutic social skills enrichment services helping teenagers, adolescents, and emerging adults become more confident, creative, and socially capable through the intentional facilitation of tabletop role-playing games. The program serves youth struggling with social isolation, anxiety, and depression, as well as social challenges related to autism spectrum or ADHD diagnoses. Around 40 families benefit from services across the greater Seattle area, and donations to Game to Grow serve to expand services so that more families can benefit.

Game to Grow's mission includes providing services, teaching and training others to enrich their communities with similar services, and to raise awareness about the life-enriching power of games of all kinds. Tabletop games, role-playing games, and video games all have the power to improve our lives, and the benefits are magnified when we play with intention. We don't want people to just game more, we want people to game better.

Don't just game. Game to grow.

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Name: _____

The **Rumor** System

A bad thing is happening in a **place** and
there's a **reason we care** about it!

What is happening or is about to happen?

Where is it happening or about to happen?

Why do we care?



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Name: _____

The **Rumor** System

My Two Votes:



Name: _____

The **Rumor** System

My Two Votes:



Name: _____

The **Rumor** System

My Two Votes:



Name: _____

The **Rumor** System

My Two Votes:



Name: _____

The **Rumor** System

Create some additional **gossip** about the rumor.

I heard that:

I heard that:



Name: _____

The **Rumor** System

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I heard that:

I heard that:



Name: _____

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