

#WritingWithDice: Reframing Solo Roleplay

Table of Contents

[What is this for?](#)

[First, some brief definitions](#)

[Baseline Assumptions](#)

[Genre and Setting Assumptions](#)

[Principles](#)

[The system](#)

[Initial Prep](#)

[Generate Principles](#)

[Playing an Adventure From Start to Finish](#)

[Step 0 - Consider your chosen genre/setting locked](#)

[Step 1 - Brainstorming Phase](#)

[Potential fiction](#)

[Step 2- Check against Principles and Assumptions](#)

[Step 3 - Check Against Principles Again](#)

[Step 4 - Create a new Principle](#)

[Oracles: An Optional Rule](#)

[Step 5 - Check for unearned goals or advantages](#)

[Step 6: Commit Your Fiction](#)

[Upkeep Phase](#)

[Iteratively create an adventure and expand the world](#)

[The One Page Cheat Sheet for Writing with Dice](#)

What is this for?

This system is built to provide a structure around writing fiction during those parts of a game when you are not engaging with creative aids (oracles¹, idea generators, etc).

First, some brief definitions

Baseline Assumptions

Baseline assumptions are facts that are trivially true, or considered as such by you due to experience. "Living beings need to breathe" or "the sky is blue" are an example.

Genre and Setting Assumptions

Things that you understand to be the defining elements of a genre or setting. genre/setting premises supersede baseline assumptions when these clash².

Principles

Principles are a subset of baseline, genre, and setting assumptions that you've chosen to highlight for your game. In this system, Principles supersede baseline and genre/setting assumptions.

¹ Examples include "Game Master Emulators" such as the Mythic GME.
<http://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/20798/Mythic-Game-Master-Emulator?it=1>

² Incidentally, thinking about baseline assumptions and altering them is a good way to come up with weirder settings.

The system

Initial Prep

Generate Principles

First, you pick a genre, or a setting. These can be generic, specific, or mashups. Examples include: "High Fantasy", "Sci-Fi", "Feudal Japan", "WWII", "Star Trek", "Miami Vice", "Scarface in Space", and "The Medieval X-Files".

Next, you will write down 15 to 20 statements that describe some aspect of the genre or setting you chose. These facts are Principles.

It helps to think of these in terms of Narrow and Broad. Narrow Principles are best when they briefly describe named locations, important people, and perhaps the conflicts between them. Broad Principles should be more like rules of thumb that apply more generally to some aspect of the setting. A ratio of two broad ones to one narrow one seems to work.

I've found it's easier to rely directly on one or more information sources, if your genre or setting is based on them. Sometimes you can't do that, so it's fine to just rely on your own knowledge and understanding of the genre/setting. Don't bother with baseline assumptions unless they're an exception in your setting that you want to highlight.

My chosen genre is "Conan" (as opposed to more generic Sword & Sorcery) and the setting, by implication, is "Hyperborea." The example list below was mined from a Conan wiki. :

Broader:

1. "The Picts raid into the mountains of Zingara for tin and grain."
2. "The worst insult you can give a Pict is to throw him into a cell."
3. "Pict clans are generally at feud with each other, and their simple customs are blood-thirsty. They practice human sacrifice, blood-feud, and the burning alive of captives."

4. "Picts are naked except for scanty doe-skin loin-cloths. Tribal designs and marks are painted on their faces and breasts, and they vary by clan and by role (warrior vs hunter marks)."
5. "Pictish women wail their dead."
6. "The Picts are primarily hunter-gatherers and fish the sea and the rivers. Their lands are rife with game and fish."
7. "Ships from Zingara occasionally come and trade weapons and ornaments and wine to the coastal Pictish tribes. "
8. "Zingara is a knightly land of rapiers and honorable duels."
9. "Kordova, the capital of Zingara, lies on the mouth of the Black River over what used to be the original city."
10. "The Pit is the hollowed out undercity over which Kordova was built. This is where where criminals, outlaws and the dregs of Kordavan society hold court. "
11. "Zingaran counts and barons live in castles. Nobles include the slave-drivers of the black serfs who toil in the plantations of southern Zingara."
12. "The Zingarans are by nature neither explorers nor colonists."
13. "Zingaran armor and garments are rich and ornate"

Narrower:

1. "Pictish chieftain Gorm dreams of leading his people to conquest over the western nations."
2. "Pictish shaman Zogar Sag can transfer the soul of a captured enemy into a serpent."
3. "Zingaran King Ferdrugo, has been wasting away in recent weeks, issuing questionable decrees and acting very much out of character."
4. "It is rumored around The Pit that Zingaran Duke Villagro covets a marriage to Princess Chabela, daughter to King Fredugo."

When playing, if you have anything like a character history written out, you will also consider anything in it to be a Principle.

Playing an Adventure From Start to Finish

Step 0 - Consider your chosen genre/setting locked

This means that once you start play, you can't unilaterally decide to alter the genre. The system gets to have a say in the form of requiring you to alter your chosen genre by adding or modifying Principles. We won't get into how to do that just yet, but it's important to know this before you begin play.

Step 1 - Brainstorming Phase

In this phase you will brainstorm ideas for your fiction. These will be the things you'll use to set up a scene, set up a situation, describe what is happening during a scene, etc. Everything that goes into an adventure starts here.

I recommend two separate places in which to write, though you can try to keep it in your head if you want. One place will be for scrap notes, and the other one for fiction that you've committed to the adventure (i.e. what really happened in the adventure).

Browse each Principle in the list. Consider each one alone or in different combinations. Let them inspire ideas and try to withhold judgement. If you need a little help to get the creative juices going, look at art, literature snippets, or other information sources that are representative of the genre/setting.

Write these ideas down on your scrap notes page if it helps you, or just do it inside your head. When you set upon an idea or set of ideas that piques your interest or makes you excited, stop brainstorming; anything that makes you go "Hmm...", "Cool..." or "Oh yeah..." is really good. These you write down on your scrap notes.

An example:

From the sample principles above, I start throwing ideas to myself. Assume, I have chosen to play a Pictish player character.

- "The war band is planning a raid for grain on the mountains of Zingara. This is my first raid and I will earn the mark of a warrior."
- "I'm a Pictish prisoner who has been thrown on a cell by my owner in one of the plantations of Zingara. This is the ultimate insult and I will have my revenge."
- "I'm a young Pictish hunter. My father will be taking me with the men to the trading post where a Zingaran ship came to trade."
- "I'm a Pictish prisoner. I can hear my sister mourn her husband who was just killed by a member of a rival clan."
- "I'm a Pictish hunter. I just came back to my village only to find it destroyed. A young boy who was hiding in the forest tells me my wife was taken prisoner along with others by a rival clan. I know what they do to captives (human sacrifice in the fire)."

I stop brainstorming, because I really like the urgency of the last one. At this point, I might embellish this idea into a fuller description of the boy, the wreckage of the village, the rival tribe,

etc inside my head or on my scrap notes. To keep the example simple, however, I will pretend I want to commit the fiction as it exists right now.

Potential fiction

These ideas are only potential fiction. Before they can be considered "what really happened" in the adventure, you must evaluate them according to your Principles and assumptions so they can be committed. In the next steps, you will do that by running the idea through a series of checkpoints.

A lot of this will happen as quick mental judgements, especially if you feel confidently familiar with the setting or genre conventions. If you don't, the process may be slower until you achieve that level of comfort with the genre and/or setting.

Step 2- Check against Principles and Assumptions

Think about the genre and/or setting you picked. Quick, does the idea fall within their assumptions (including those you highlighted as Principles)? If they don't or you're not sure, are you willing to modify them to fit within these assumptions? If you decide to modify them to fit within genre and setting expectations, go back to Step 1 to brainstorm some modifications. If you're not willing to change them, skip to step # 4.

I will illustrate with an example: "I'm a pictish hunter. I just came back to my village only to find it destroyed. A young boy who was hiding in the forest tells me my wife was taken prisoner along with others by a rival clan. I know what they do to captives (human sacrifice in the fire). I grab my laser pistol, find a friendly clan to help, and set out to find her."

I just added that one last line to my brainstormed idea to purposely go outside the genre/setting expectations of "Conan" (and "Hyperborea") as I understand them. I don't think Conan ever had laser pistols, so I feel strongly that this item does not belong. Now I have a choice to either go back to Step 1 and brainstorm a replacement that fits the genre/setting, or I can go to Step 4 and try to force this sci-fi element as a Principle onto the "Conan" genre. I will discuss how this is done in Step 4, so for now I will decide to go back to the drawing board and modify the element to fit "Conan".

I brainstorm for about five seconds and decide that since I'm a hunter, and I actually have weapons listed in my character sheet, I'll use those instead. The potential fiction then becomes: "I'm a pictish hunter. I just came back to my village only to find it destroyed. A young boy who was hiding in the forest tells me my wife was taken prisoner along with others by a rival clan. I know what they do to captives (human sacrifice in the fire). I grab my **bow and knife**, find a friendly clan to help, and set out to find her." That sounds more like the world Conan lives in.

Are there any other elements that don't fit or that I'm not sure about? Well, for a second I can't remember if Picts lived in villages or not. They could be nomadic that never settled, so instead of villages, they could be in temporary camps. I actually want to stay in line with the source material on this detail, so I check very quickly in my trusty wiki, and confirm that Picts do in fact live in villages.

I also know from memory that there is a Pictish Wilderness, which consists of marshes and vast dense forests, so the boy hiding in the forest feels right. That boys exist is in itself a baseline assumption (remember those?), so that wouldn't even register. There is nothing in the Conan world that tells me the existence of boys is an exception.

If you find that this step is taking you too much time to perform because you really want to strictly stick to the setting, one trick I've found is to browse the source material itself during brainstorming and to pick individual things directly from the pages (like the pictish forest, the village, the weapons).

I feel pretty confident that everything in my example now fits with the "Conan" genre and its setting, so I can move on to the next step.

Step 3 - Check Against Principles Again

You've confirmed that your potential fiction fits within the parameters of your genre/setting. In this step, you now need to evaluate whether the things in the fiction are a direct expression of Principles (the assumptions of the setting/genre you chose to highlight), or if they work within the context of Principles.

To elaborate on fictional elements that are **not** a direct manifestation of a Principle, your amplification of this non-principled fiction must itself use Principles as a direct (root) cause, or describe how they are themselves a cause for a Principle (or a direct manifestation of a Principle).

Whenever you see these types of elaboration, you need to decide whether you will remove them, modify them to fit the rules just mentioned, or force them into the fiction as is by adding new Principles to support them (Step #4).

To illustrate by example, I will examine my potential fiction so far, with some longish additions:

"I'm a pictish hunter. I just came back to my village only to find it destroyed. A young boy who was hiding in the forest tells me my wife was taken prisoner along with others by a rival clan. I know what they do to captives (human sacrifice in the fire). I grab my bow and knife, find a friendly clan to help, and set out to find her.

I must save my wife and exact my revenge on the Raven clan without undoing alliances with other clans. This would not bode well for the unification of the tribes against the Cimmerian and Hyborian push into our lands. The Hyborians drove out my people from the valley of Zingg centuries ago, but they were still not satisfied. Ever looking to expand, our cattle raids into their conquered lands gave them the pretext to turn their greedy eyes here.

The Cimmerians, on the other hand. They have been enemies of the Picts for generations and would use any opportunity to erase us from this world."

The underlined portion of the last two paragraphs were a big digression from the topic of saving my wife. Though a right fit for the genre/setting expectations (I checked against Step 2 already), this fiction is nothing more than fluff, because it is not a direct expression of Principles, nor does it use them as direct causes, or act as an incitement for them. The underlined fiction also fails to highlight Principles by using them as root causes, or by showing them to be consequences of the fiction.

As I examine things, I see that Cimmerians and Hyborians pushing into Pictish lands has nothing to do with the fictional elements I decided to highlight in the Principles. Yet, I went on and on about the reasons for their invasion into Pictish lands, all while ignoring established Principles. I essentially used other setting assumptions³ to act as Principles behind the Cimmerian and Hyborian invasion and failed to even use the invasion as a cause for an existing Principle.

Instead, I could have used a series of Principles to be the reasons for the invasions, or used the invasions to explain fiction that was already a manifestation of Principles. In short, I didn't explore those things in the context of existing Principles.

I have also invented the Hyborian and Cimmerian invasion as a reason for alliances and unification between Pictish tribes, despite having at least one obvious Principle available to use as a different reason: "Pictish chieftain Gorm dreams of leading his people to conquest over the western nations."

The examination of the fiction did not raise any red flags for the parts not underlined, but I will justify them in order to better get the concept across. I will number the relevant Principles and reference them for each discrete piece of fiction I identify:

³ The other setting assumptions, not highlighted as Principles, are:

1. The Cimmerians and Hyborians are encroaching upon Pictland
2. Centuries ago, the Hyborians drove out the Picts from the valley of Zingg
3. The Hyborians are always looking to expand their territory through conquest
4. The Cimmerians and Picts have been enemies for generations
5. The Cimmerians would use any opportunity to erase the Picts from Hyperborea

1. "Pict clans are generally at feud with each other, and their simple customs are blood-thirsty. They practice human sacrifice, blood-feud, and the burning alive of captives."
 2. "Picts are naked except for scanty doe-skin loin-cloths. Tribal designs and marks are painted on their faces and breasts, and they vary by clan and by role (warrior vs hunter marks)."
 3. "The Picts are primarily hunter-gatherers and fish the sea and the rivers. Their lands are rife with game and fish."
 4. "Pictish chieftain Gorm dreams of leading his people to conquest over the western nations."
- "I'm a pictish hunter": justified by #3 and my character sheet.
 - "I just came back to my village only to find it destroyed. A young boy who was hiding in the forest tells me my wife was taken prisoner along with others by a rival clan": justified by #1
 - "I know what they do to captives (human sacrifice in the fire)." Justified by #1.
 - "I grab my bow and knife" Justified by my character sheet mostly, but also by #1 or #3's mention of warriors."
 - "find a friendly clan to help" #1 could apply since "generally at feud" implies that sometimes they're not. If I want to be very strict and literal, I could rule that "friendly clan" is not covered by this, and change it to "neutral clan". I don't think the strictness is warranted.

I can definitely justify it by the fact that I'd be looking for help to rescue the wife from being sacrificed and burnt alive-- this makes the fiction be in service to the Principle.

- " and set out to find her." Same reasons as above.
- "I must save my wife and exact my revenge on the Raven clan without undoing alliances with other clans. This would not bode well for the unification of the tribes against" #1's blood feud, #4 if the unification is against the lands they want to conquer.

Most of these judgements would happen intuitively and quickly. If something does slip by which is not based on Principles, not using Principles as a cause, or not being a cause for Principles, it's not the end of the world. However, if I catch it later, I will try to treat it correctly from that point on by leaving it as color or a loose end.

For this example, I decide that I will remove the elaborating fiction that failed these conditions, so that all of it is compliant with each of the steps outlined so far:

"I'm a pictish hunter. I just came back to my village only to find it destroyed. A young boy who was hiding in the forest tells me my wife was taken prisoner along with others by a

rival clan. I know what they do to captives (human sacrifice in the fire). I grab my bow and knife, find a friendly clan to help, and set out to find her.

I must save my wife and exact my revenge on the Raven clan without undoing alliances with other clans. This would not bode well for the unification of the tribes against the Cimmerian and Hyborian push into our lands."

I decide to take out the elaboration on why Pictland is being invaded and leave the underlined fiction as color, or a loose thread that I might pick up using the context of Principles as explained in this section. With that, I feel like I can commit the fiction to the adventure, and now I have the start of my first scene!

Still, what would I need to do if I actually wanted to include all of that fiction I eliminated? That is explained in the next step.

Step 4 - Create a new Principle

You have checked your idea against all of the previous checkpoints, and it failed to comply to one or more of them. Still, you insist on including it in the adventure. This means that you need to create new Principles to support the assumptions being used in your fiction, whether you're trying to bring new assumptions in the genre/setting or trying to highlight assumptions that already exist.

How do you do this? You do it by engaging your player character with the fiction via the rules of your RPG system of choice. You can find a rule or set of rules that look fun to set up a situation where they can be used to justify the new fiction. Or you can use the potential fiction as inspiration to create a situation, then look for a rule that can be used for the purpose of justifying the fiction you want to create Principles for.

Rules as mechanics usually imply a check of some ability or skill; a test involving the fiction that needs a new Principle to support it. Other kind of rules might involve resources, advantages⁴, etc that you'd have to use creatively with the elements in question.

Once you have a situation and a relevant rule or mechanic, choose a difficulty rating, if applicable. The difficulty should follow any guidelines provided by the RPG system you are using along with the context of the obstacle. If there aren't any system guidelines, just use the context of the situation to guide you.

Back to the example:

⁴ Such as GURPS Weirdness Magnet, which does not involve mechanics, but can be used at the GM's discretion to add fiction: <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/WeirdnessMagnet>

"I'm a pictish hunter. I just came back to my village only to find it destroyed. A young boy who was hiding in the forest tells me my wife was taken prisoner along with others by a rival clan. I know what they do to captives (human sacrifice in the fire). I grab my bow and knife, find a friendly clan to help, and set out to find her.

I must save my wife and exact my revenge on the Raven clan without undoing alliances with other clans. This would not bode well for the unification of the tribes against the Cimmerian and Hyborian push into our lands. The Hyborians drove out my people from the valley of Zingg centuries ago, but they were still not satisfied. Ever looking to expand, our cattle raids into their conquered lands gave them the pretext to turn their greedy eyes here.

The Cimmerians, on the other hand. They have been enemies of the Picts for generations and would use any opportunity to erase us from this world."

I'm using a ruleset for a flavor of the most popular rpg. In order to bring all of these elements into the fiction, I need to find a way to justify them via the rules. I want to take care of as many of them as possible with as few skill rolls as I can, though I can use as many rolls or rules as I want to to achieve my purpose (I just prefer fewer rolls).

To frame the situation, it helps to distill the Principles behind the fiction that I want to include. What am I trying to highlight about the larger world with this fiction:

1. The Cimmerians and Hyborians are encroaching upon Pictland
2. Centuries ago, the Hyborians drove out the Picts from the valley of Zingg
3. The Hyborians are always looking to expand their territory through conquest
4. The Cimmerians and Picts have been enemies for generations
5. The Cimmerians would use any opportunity to erase the Picts from Hyperborea

I see that I could probably include all of these in one single skill check if I included a Cimmerian, Hyborian and Pict in one group. If they were working together to advance the invasion, I can then find a way to include the historical enmity between Picts and Cimmerians, as well as the stuff about the conflicts past and present between Hyborians and Picts. This gives me a vague idea of what the situation could be.

The next thing I look for is for a rule that I can use at once with the three potential characters, which creates an opportunity for me to introduce elements based on the proposed Principles. I choose to look at my character sheet first (though I could look at the rpg system book first if I wanted to). I see that I have the Listen⁵ skill, and immediately think that almost all of the information could be revealed through pulpy dialogue that my character overhears.

⁵ <http://www.d20srd.org/srd/skills/listen.htm>

I always go with the more likely things to happen, so I assume they'd try to sneak in to check out the village. I consult the rules for Listen, and conclude that the difficulty should be 10 for unarmored opponents (deeming it unlikely that they would wear armor to sneak around in the forest). If I am successful, I will overhear them approaching.

I roll and get a 20! I get no special effects from that, though. Still, I've now fulfilled part of my requirement for including the fiction. Now I need to show how it's justified by this mechanic roll. I do that by writing up the situation (the potential new Principles behind the fiction are noted in parentheses):

"As I was getting ready to get help, I heard some noise coming from the forest. The boy and I had just enough time to hide in the forest.

'What is this?' I whispered under my breath. I saw a shaman with two foreigners. The two foreigners were tall. One dark haired and, muscular under his pelt; the other one blonde. As they got closer, I could hear that the Pict shaman and the dark haired outsider had been bickering.

'Are you sure no one escaped?' the shaman asked the others.

'If I could, I would make sure every last one of you vermin was dead,' spat the dark haired one.

The blonde one sharply turned to him before he could finish his words. "Bite your tongue, Cimmerian.' (#5)

A Cimmerian and a Pict shaman! How could this be? Our peoples have been enemies for generations. (#4)

'The Raven clan gets half the lands from the Panther clan. Cimmeria and Hyboria gets the other half. That's the deal,' said the shaman. (#1)

'You deliver the rest of the settlements to our forces, Thul-Sag, and your clan will have more than enough land,' said the blonde one.

The Hyborians and hated Cimmerians were invading our home!"

At this point I decide that I need another check to include new Principle #3. I could have the characters I'm listening to relay the information in that Principle, but I want to try and see if my character knows it. I don't have a Knowledge ⁶ skill, but the rules allow me to check for common knowledge at difficulty 10. I roll a lowly 4 and thus I fail at history. My original thought was:

⁶ <http://www.d20srd.org/srd/skills/knowledge.htm>

~~“The songs of the shamans say that Hyboria stole Zingg from our ancestors (#3); now they were trying it again (#3) and that son of a dog Thul-Sag was helping them. I swear I will kill him with my bare hands.”~~

It now will be:

“The shaman said to the Hyborian, ‘Hmmp! Your people’s greed knows no bound. Centuries ago you took Zingg valley from us, and now you want our lands’.

The blonde Hyborian grabbed Thul-Sag by his neck, and threw him down on the ground. Seething with anger, he could barely hold back the disgust in his voice: ‘It is only through our charity that your clan gets to keep its lands. You had better keep your silence, dog.’

With that he picked up the shaman from the ground, and ordered him to lead them back out of the forest.”

Because I failed my Listen check, I had to build the fiction on from that failure. I concluded that the failure meant that I couldn’t include the ~~striked-through~~ fiction I had planned in my head. So I had to work around that check’s failure to express the new Principle through it.

I’ve now covered all of the new Principles I want to create! All that is left is to add the Principles to the list, and integrate this new fiction with the old one. I make changes to the old fiction so that the pieces fit smoothly:

Old fiction:

~~“I’m a pictish hunter. I just came back to my village only to find it destroyed. A young boy who was hiding in the forest tells me my wife was taken prisoner along with others by a rival clan. I know what they do to captives (human sacrifice in the fire). I grab my bow and knife, find a friendly clan to help, and set out to find her.”~~

New fiction:

“I’m a pictish hunter. I had just come back to my village only to find it destroyed. A young boy who was hiding in the forest told me that my wife was taken prisoner along with others by the Raven clan. I know what they do to captives (human sacrifice in the fire).

As I was getting ready to get help, I heard some noise coming from the forest. That gave us enough time to hide in the forest, *so I grabbed my bow and knife*, and barked at the boy to follow me into the nearby cover of foliage

As I saw three men step into the village clearing, I heard myself whisper, 'What is this?'

I saw a Pict shaman with two tall foreigners. One foreigner was dark haired and, muscular under his pelt clothing; the other one blonde. As they got closer, I could hear that the shaman and the dark haired outsider had been bickering.

'Are you sure no one escaped?' the shaman asked.

'If I could, I would make sure every last one of you vermin was dead,' spat the dark haired one. The blonde one sharply turned to him before he could finish his words. "Bite your tongue, Cimmerian.'

A Cimmerian and a shaman! How could this be? Our peoples have been enemies for generations.

'The Raven clan gets half the lands from the Panther clan. Cimmeria and Hyboria gets the other half. That's the deal,' said the shaman.

'You deliver the rest of the settlements to our forces, Thul-Sag, and your clan will have more than enough land,' said the blonde one.

The shaman said to the Hyborian, 'Hmph! Your people's greed knows no bound. Centuries ago you took Zingg valley from us, and now you want our lands'.

The blonde Hyborian grabbed Thul-Sag by his neck, and threw him down on the ground. Seething with anger he could barely hold back the disgust in his voice: 'It is only through our charity that your own clan gets to keep its lands. You had better keep your silence, dog.

With that he picked up the shaman from the ground, and ordered him to lead them back out of the forest.

~~**Old fiction:** I must save my wife and exact my revenge on the Raven clan without undoing alliances with other clans. This would not bode well for the unification of the tribes against the Cimmerian and Hyborian push into our lands. The Hyborians drove out my people from the valley of Zingg centuries ago, but they were still not satisfied. Ever looking to expand, our cattle raids into their conquered lands gave them the pretext to turn their greedy eyes here.~~

~~The Cimmerians, on the other hand. They have been enemies of the Picts for generations and would use any opportunity to erase us from this world.~~

I swear I will kill Thul-Sag with my bare hands, after I rescue Aiyana, if she still lives. I must be careful in exacting my revenge on the Raven clan and Thul-Sag, however. The Panther alliance with the Eagle and Wolf is precarious, and any inter-clan fighting could

fragment the tribes further. This would not bode well for any chances of joining our forces against this new threat.

I find help from the Eagle and Wolf clans, after telling them of treacherous Thul-Sag's actions, and set out for the Raven village to find him and his allies.”

As a final step, I do a quick pass through each previous step to make sure I haven't introduced any fiction that violates their rules. Then I'm almost ready to commit the fiction permanently into the adventure. Before we go on to the next and final step, again make sure you include your new Principles in the list.

Oracles: An Optional Rule

You should always give strong precedence to your RPG system. However, if for some reason you cannot think of a rule or mechanic to help you introduce new Principles (and the new fiction based on them), you can fall back on a creativity tool in the form of an Oracle.

How? Distill the new Principles out of the fiction, and ask the binary question “Is this principle true?” Set the odds in a way that is proportional to how close or far from genre and setting assumptions the Principle is. If the answer is ‘No’, you cannot try to introduce that Principle into the fiction via the oracle again. You will have to use RPG system rules and mechanics.

If the answer is ‘Yes’, you add the Principle to the list and add the fiction based on it as you wish (whether in its original form or not).

Step 5 - Check for unearned goals or advantages

Does your fiction grant you any unearned goal or advantage? It's not challenging to just narrate an achievement or advantage into the fiction. It's much more satisfying to earn them. If you find that your fiction would give you something of significance that is unearned, assume that there is an obstacle or challenge proportional to your desired goal or advantage. In the case of advantages, if you don't want to set up an obstacle, assume that your opponents strengths or advantages that cancel out your unearned advantages.

The resolution to the obstacle should be handled by your RPG system mechanics and rules. Pick something in the rules or mechanics that is fun, and build an obstacle that stands in the way of getting what you want. The rules described in Step #4 apply here, since there is a potential to introduce new Principles via the mechanics of the challenge.

Also, if your RPG system supports random generation of challenges, you can use that to generate them. If you care about maintaining the setting/genre feel, however, make sure the elements in the random generator fit with their assumptions.

Once you have an obstacle and a relevant rule or mechanic, you can apply a difficulty rating, as per Step #4.

I will attempt to illustrate by continuing with our running example. I will only paste the relevant part:

“I find help from the Eagle and Wolf clans, after telling them of treacherous Thul-Sag’s actions, and set out for the Raven village to find him and his allies.”

I feel like assuming that the Eagle and Wolf clans would help me after hearing my tale is a big unearned advantage. To me, this clearly calls for an obstacle. Not only that, aren’t there dangerous encounters on the way to their villages? I use Principles and assumptions to brainstorm ideas what the obstacle to obtaining help could be, and use a random encounter generator online to come up with two ferocious baboons. This is what results from my brainstorming:

“[For the sake of brevity, I assume the baboons were dealt with successfully on the way to the Eagle and Wolf clan villages]. After dispatching the two beasts, I finally arrive at the Eagle clan village. They receive me cautiously. I am not sure if they will believe my tale.”

I decide that I need a Diplomacy ⁷ challenge to convince them to aid. I rule that they are indifferent to me and my clan, since our clans’ alliance is tenuous (in keeping with Principles about clans generally feuding). This means I need to beat a difficulty of 15. Another 20! I can’t believe it! Thul-Sag’s actions are beyond the pale even if it’s part of the Panther-Raven blood-feud. The chief Eagle is enraged. I assume that the same is true for the Wolf clan, for brevity’s sake.

“My tale about Thul-Sag’s treachery nearly brings the Eagle clan to a blood frenzy. The shaman’s actions are beyond the pale even in light of the Panther-Raven blood feud. How can they let foreigners invade our land?, they reason.

We set out to find the Wolf clan village. Seeing that the Eagle clan was convinced of the truth of my words, they also agree to join me in the fight against the Raven and the invaders, though they swear to have my head if I’m up to any tricks. I tell them they can have Thul-Sag’s head after I cut it off.

⁷ <http://www.d20srd.org/srd/skills/diplomacy.htm>

I leave the boy at their village, and we head out for the Raven settlement with 13 men from each clan, making us 27 in total."

I could add as many of these obstacles as I thought would be fun, such as weather, geography, etc. To reiterate, the point is to avoid granting myself any goals or advantages that aren't deserved.

If I had wanted to assume the advantage, I might have balanced it by assuming the opposition had an equal force. Still, I would have missed out on a fun use of the Diplomacy skill which made the fiction more interesting to me.

As part of the final step, just like in Step #4, add any new Principles that your rules or mechanical challenge may have implied as a base (assuming advantages and goals do not add new Principles). Then mentally a quick run through of each of the Steps 1-5 again to make sure everything in your final fiction meets the requirements. Make sure to include the new Principles when you check your fiction against in Steps 2 and 3.

If you're satisfied that the fiction meets those requirements, you commit it to the adventure, and move on to the next piece of fiction.

Step 6: Commit Your Fiction

Once you feel your potential fiction complies with steps 2,3, and 5, you commit it permanently to the adventure as "what really happened" in your world.

Upkeep Phase

In between scenes, you should do a bit of upkeep in your Principle list. Look at the Principles you have so far. Do you have a set of narrow principles that suggest a broader one? Update the list by removing the narrow ones, and adding a broader Principle. Mind the ratio, however, as you don't want too many broad Principles without narrower ones.

For instance, if there are three Principles like "The Pictish shamans can talk to animals", "The Pictish shamans can talk to plants" and "The Pictish shamans can talk to the hills", perhaps it would be better to have a broad principle like, "The Pictish shamans can communicate with nature and the earth itself."

Also, check for Principles that contradict or supersede other Principles, and reconcile them as appropriate. For example, if you have an earlier Principle like "Hyperborea is encroaching on

the Picts territory" but a more recent one is "The Picts have expelled Hyperborea from Pictland", you might want to reconcile these by changing the former to "Hyperborea covets the land where the Picts live", or perhaps combining them into "Covetous and ever expanding Hyperborea has been expelled from the land of the Picts".

You do the Upkeep Phase at the end of every scene.

Iteratively create an adventure and expand the world

The process through the steps described above is iterative. Each time you make a change at one of the steps, you should check through the previous ones to make sure the changes comply with the requirements. Once you feel confident everything is according to the rules, you commit your fiction. This is the pushback that the system gives you.

While as written here it may seem like a long series of steps, I find that most of the evaluations I do of the fiction are quick, so the process feels fast. Setting up situations related to mechanics takes longer, but I think they are part of the fun of engaging with the base RPG system.

As you keep repeating each step for each new piece of fiction and each new change, you will eventually end up with a complete adventure where you've explored the world through your Principles and assumptions as well as through your RPG system. Each time you play, you will also expand the possible paths future adventures can take through the addition of new Principles to highlight the assumptions of your setting and genre.

Special thanks to Zach Best and especially Chris Stieha. Without their feedback, I wouldn't have felt comfortable making this public. I hope you guys like it.

The One Page Cheat Sheet for Writing with Dice

Phase 1: Generate principles

Pick a genre or setting and brainstorm 15 - 20 Principles with a recommended 2:1 ratio of broad, general-rules-of-thumb Principles to narrow, specific places, locations and people Principles.

Phase 2: Playing an Adventure From Start to Finish

Step 0: Consider your chosen genre/setting locked

What has been chosen is chosen. The only way to change the genre or setting is by engaging the rpg mechanics to introduce new Principles.

Step 1: Brainstorming Phase

Combine Principles to create new ideas until you get the ideas that make you say 'cool!'. Write these ideas on scrap paper because they are not yet truths of your world.

Step 2- Check against Principles and Assumptions

Think about the genre and/or setting you picked. Your ideas, and the fiction expressing them, must strictly fit their conventions and assumptions. If they don't, introduce them to the setting/genre by creating new supporting Principles via mechanics per Step 4.

Step 3: Check Against Principles Again

Compare your ideas from Step 1 to your Principles from Step -1. Your new ideas must either follow from the Principles, be impetus for a Principle, or beget a Principle by engaging the rpg mechanics, see Step 4.

Step 4: Create (a) new Principle(s)

Create new Principles by either engaging the rpg mechanics or, as the less preferred option, by consulting an Oracle.

Step 5: Check for unearned goals or advantages

If you find yourself achieving goals or advantages without a conflict or obstacle, go back and invoke an obstacle that engages the rpg mechanics.

Step 6: Commit Your Fiction

Once you feel your potential fiction complies with steps 2,3, and 5, you commit it permanently to the adventure as "what really happened" in your world.

Phase 3: Upkeep Phase

For sets of Principles that suggest a unifying Principle behind them, consider generalizing into a broader Principle. If Principles seem to contradict or replace one another, look for a way of reconciling them into a single principle.

Create an adventure and expand the world in an iterative way

The process is iterative so adventures occur as an ongoing loop of Phases 2 and 3, and the steps outlined in Phase 2.