

Emotional Rollercoaster
A Story Game for One
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Introduction

I remember the first time I summoned a monster in Final Fantasy VII so many years ago. I was blown away by the designs, the animation, the cinematography, the fantastic creatures, and the sense of power that shone from these supernatural allies.

If you've never played the game, summons are magic spells that have these outrageous introductions for creatures that help your group or hurt the enemy with the most powerful effects in the game. Knights of the Round, for example, has two minutes of these huge armored heroes straight from a Frank Frazetta painting cutting, hacking, and stabbing at a monster, each time doing 9999 points of damage. When I finally got the ability to cast the spell, I called my best friend over to my house so he could watch the first summon with me. You can't believe how excited I was that five minutes, waiting for Todd to come over, and afterwards the streams of "Dude!", "Did You See That Part!", and "Awesome!" lasted as long as the summons itself.

However, that was the first time. The next few times, I had an evil grin as I unleashed the pain. Then it became a matter-of-fact order, like a professional assassination. Then it became a chore. Within one weekend, it had gone from the coolest thing I had ever seen to a tedious, grating annoyance.

I've heard of diminishing returns, but this was ridiculous. There are many scenes from games and movies that I still enjoy after countless viewings, such as the "Hello, my name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die." bit from The Princess Bride. What was the difference? Why did some moments stick with me with the same power while others faded away?

It took years of thinking before I came to the conclusion is that Story is King. If there isn't an emotional connection to the action, then the action becomes meaningless, and in the dark side of storytelling, that meaningless leads to boredom, and boredom leads to the death of the story.

I believe that the most important thing that is needed to enjoy a story is that the reader, or player in an RPG, is emotionally invested in the characters. It was my main concern to create a game that has mechanics that reinforce that connection. It has been said before that a good story is an emotional roller coaster. So, this isn't a game about having supernatural powers, or exploring the galaxy, although you could have those in your story. You can still have those moments of over-the-top action, but the effect of the rush is multiplied by the hopes and fears that the audience has about the outcome.

Story & Character Creation

Before creating your character, you need to know what kind of story that you are going to tell. For this game, I've picked 3 descriptors to describe the story. Those three are Genre, Tone, and Situation.

For the situation, I have a table that I've been working on for another game which has its origins from John Ross's RPG Plots, the book 20 Master Plots, and many hours digging around TV Tropes. So if you're stuck for a story idea, grab a deck of playing cards and draw a couple of cards, or just pick a couple that stick out. Combining two of these key word phrases has almost always given me a quick idea for a story.

Story Starters				
	Hearts	Diamonds	Clubs	Spades
Ace	Temptation	What Happened Here?	Rivals	Revenge
Two	Forbidden Love	Who Are You?	Inner Peace	Accident
Three	Buddy Story	Riddle of the Missing	Fatal Flaw	Mistake
Four	Boy and Dog	Riddle of Motivation	Doubt Paranoia	Theft
Five	Lost Love	Asylum	The Protectors	Blackmail
Six	Sacrifice	Monster in the House	Invasion	Redemption
Seven	Baptism of Fire	Flee	The Choice	Rebirth
Eight	More to Heaven and Earth	Sanctuary	The Trial	Dream/Nightmare Reversal
Nine	Maturation	Dragon's Lair	Just Rewards	Descent
Ten	Underdog	Limited Resources (Famine)	Cleaning House	Chase
Jack	Fish out of Water	Natural Disaster (Tempest)	Progress	Escape
Queen	Discovered Purpose	Aftermath	Loyalty	Rescue
King	Broken Family	Revolt	Conspiracy	Escort

To create a character, grab a blank piece of paper and write the Genre, Tone, and Situation on the top of the page. Then write a concept that you are interested in playing.

This concept is the characters self-image, and it determines the kind of story that you going to tell. My point is

that there are hundreds of different possible self-images for the same character. Does your character define themselves by their job, such as a police officer, do they define themselves by their relationships, such as a loving father, or their emotional state, such as a born loser. It is perfectly acceptable to have a radioactive sewer mutant who's main identity is a lovesick daydreamer.

In most role playing games your character concept is primarily defined by such descriptions as berserker, wizard, or super spy. By doing so, the spotlight is focusing on the actions. Characters in E~R are not made like a traditional RPG. There are no stats and there are no skills. They are instead, a collection of positive and negative feelings, which are called Treasures and Baggage. Treasures are personal traits that the character is proud of, prized possessions, etc. and Baggage is the things that the character wants to change. They can be obstacles, personal flaws, or things that the character hates. Treasures and Baggage also do double duty as serving as the conflicts that the character will face and serving as the ability to overcome those conflicts.

Next to the character's self-image, write the character goal. It is important to remember that the goal should be tied to the self-image.

Below your self-image write the sentence, "*Stories Just Ask For Some Drama!*". There'll be more about that sentence in just a bit, but for now go to the next step. Divide the page with a vertical line and title each side of the page Treasures and Baggage. Under each of these sections you will be adding quick descriptions of the character's emotional landscape.

That sentence "*Stories Just Ask For Some Drama!*" is a mnemonic to help you remember the emotions of Sadness, Joy, Anger, Fear, Surprise, and Disgust. Look at those emotions as guideposts to decide what to do next. For example, when brainstorming a character's Treasures & Baggage, you can look at the known facts about the story, namely the theme, genre, tone, situation, concept, and goal and pair them with one of the emotions. Think about what could disgust the character with a trope of the genre. What could surprise the character about the tone? What about the theme makes the character angry?

When choosing Treasures and Baggage, you will rank each with a number from 1 to 3 depending on how big of role you want that aspect to play in the story. You going to need 10 points of Treasures and 20 points of Baggage. However, one thing to note about Baggage is that you're only going to use half of them in a story. They're things that COULD come up in a story, not things that WILL. I also like to make such that there are a variety of physical, mental, and social problems.

Example:

Genre: Scifi

Tone: Comedy

Situation: Erg is a radioactive sewer mutant in a post apocalyptic future that has fallen in love with one of the scientists that come out of a nearby bunker.

Concept: lovesick daydreamer

Goal: Marry the pretty girl in the Vault

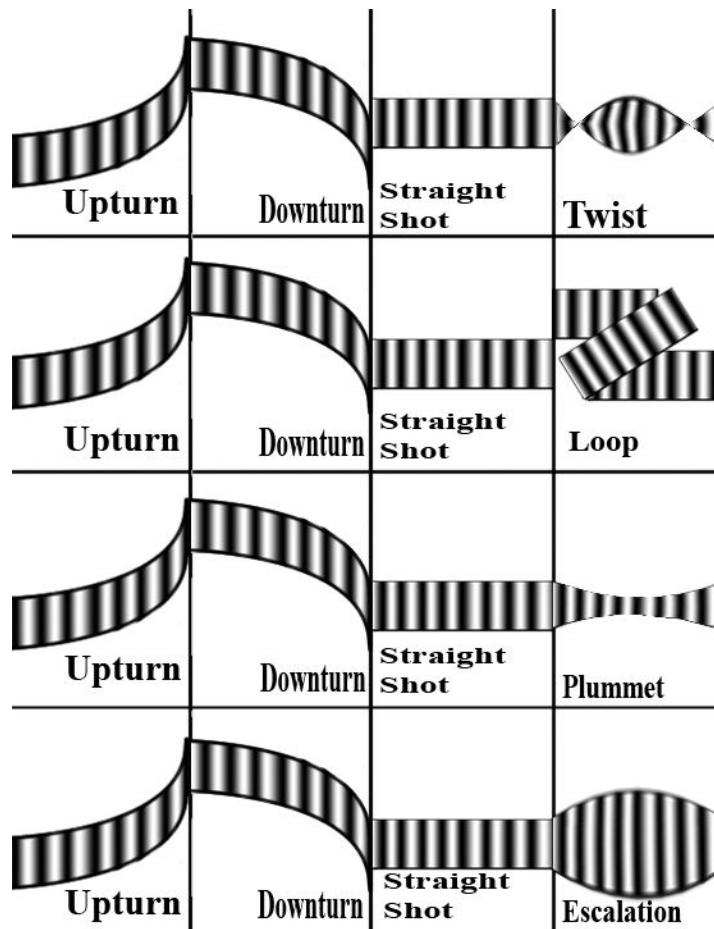
BAGGAGE	TREASURES
The Vault dwellers shoot mutants (3)	His mutant power generates energy (3)
Has misplaced his left arm(1)	Best friend runs a pirate radio station(1)
Glowing at night makes him a target(2)	Painted a graffiti portrait of the pretty scientist(2)

Acid rain is really acid (2)	Lives in a 7-11 with a working generator(2)
Ex-Girlfriend only wanted him for his brains (3)	Has a lovely singing voice (2)
The 7-11 is over a giant termite nest(2)	
Motorcycle gangs keep trashing his place(2)	
There's nothing to eat except Spam and Twinkies (1)	
Roger the Super Mutant wants the mutants to attack the Vault (3)	
Zombies won't stop asking for cigarettes (1)	

Roller Coaster Creation

Before you can start playing the game, you need to create your roller coaster. A coaster is made up of track sections that represent a scene in a story. There will be at least one turn section for every scene.

To actually make the track sections, fold a piece of paper in half four times and then tear it into 16 tiles. Then label the 16 sections like the following picture.



The upturns, downturns, and straight shots are shuffled into a pile face down and the remaining four are shuffled into a separate pile.

Playing the Game

Now that you have your character sheet and your tracks you're ready to start playing the game. You start by introducing the character and their goal in a soliloquy. After you have finished the introduction, pick one of the character's Baggages and frame a scene around the character confronting that as a conflict. Then pick one of the character's treasures as the way that he will face the problem. Using Erg, our lovesick mutant, as an example, you could start narrating a scene with the ex-girlfriend. The player decides that Erg will ask his best friend to talk to her.

Now that you have chosen one of the Baggage and one of the Treasures, you turn over one of the turn tracks to find out how the conflict turns out.

If the track was an upturn, then the conflict ends in the character's favor, and the player gets to put an X by the Baggage. When the number of Xs equals the number on the baggage, that baggage is resolved for the story.

If the track was a downturn, then the conflict ends badly for the character, and the player puts an X by the Treasure. When the number of Xs equal the number on the Treasure then that Treasure is lost.

If the track was a straight shot, then the player gets to decide to either put an X in both the Treasure and the Baggage or to let the scene go as a failure that didn't have any lasting consequences.

Whenever you end a scene and there are 10 Xs on the Baggage side, you have achieved the character's goal and get to narrate a happy ending.

However, if you end a scene and there are 10 Xs on the Treasures, then your character has an emotional breakdown, and you narrate a tragic ending.

You can use the number of Xs as a guide to how close you are to the ending and should remember that in your scene narration.

However, if you play a scene and don't like the way that intended up, you can choose to try to change the outcome by drawing a tile from the second pile.

If you drew a plummet count the number of Xs on both the Treasure and Baggage sides. If they're tied, then add another X to one Baggage of your choice and narrate how things got even worse. However, if there are unequal amounts of Xs, whichever side has more, gets one more X. Basically a plummet is trying to end the story as quick as possible.

If you drew an escalation the results of the scene are considered in a stalemate, but are carried forward to the next track section. In the next scene, pick a new treasure and baggage, or double up if the trait has two or more points invested in it, and the fate of all four is determined by the new track.

If you drew a loop the results of the scene are doubled. This means that you'll put two Xs for every one that you would have drawn otherwise.

If you drew a twist the results are the opposite of what the scene would otherwise suggest.

Whenever you run out of tiles, collect them all, shuffle, and start a new pile.

Character Advancement & Other Options

While playing this game, you should try to narrate quickly. Fly by the seat of your pants. You should aim at creating the story/character sheet in five minutes or so, and telling the whole story in another five.

You can also change the ratio of different tracks to get a different feel. For a grim story, increase the number of downturns. For a surreal story, double the number of special tracks.

You can also add emotional tags to each turn to further define how the scene plays out. For example, you could have Anger and Disgust turns for a horror story, or Sadness and Fear for a melancholy tone.

You can also try using playing cards by have the face cards representing special tracks, and using a high/low mechanic to determine upturns and downturns.

If your character won the game, you can create a new Treasure to represent what the character won and heal other Treasures so that the character is back to ten points. Then add new Baggage to get that total back up to twenty.

Influences:

Hamlet's Hit Points by Robin Laws

This is an excellent book on classifying story beats.

Making Comics by Scott McCloud

Starting on page 82, McCloud has a wonderful bit on the universal basic emotions that was the original inspiration.

Risus: The Anything RPG by S. John Ross

This fun and free system helped shape my ideas on character creation.

Also, a huge thank you to the fine folks at the Forge and Story Games for inspiring me to create a game, and to Emily for having the contest in the first place.