



Notes from the Bunker

Off the Rails

by Rich Redman

Welcome to your bunker. I'm Rich Redman, one of the designers of the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*. I may not be an expert, but I'm experienced and opinionated. Here in the bunker, we can explore some corners of the **d20 Modern** rules and create rules variants, and I can offer suggestions for your campaign based on my experience writing and running games.

This month's topic is how to deal with adventures that suddenly go in unexpected directions. If you are the perfect GM -- one who can "wing it" when necessary and stick to your notes the rest of the time -- you won't get much use out of this installment. However, you might still enjoy the anecdotes about how I screwed up an adventure and then got it back under control.

A Story

Last month, I provided some examples of characters and their motivations from an adventure I had written. This month, we'll take a look at my experiences running that adventure.

A Confession

I have long been in the habit of writing just enough of an adventure to get through the next session or two. Thus, if I got really busy with work, I was likely to be unprepared for a game session.

That situation wasn't usually so bad, but what made it worse this time was that for several weeks in a row I had simply forgotten to bring the adventure with me. Even if I was prepared (and for the first several sessions I was), the notes on my hard drive did me no good when I was gaming in another location.

The Story

Last month, I explained that a cabal of well-financed Heirs of Kyuss (see Chapter Six: Organizations in the *Urban Arcana Campaign Setting*) had created a spawn of Kyuss as a demonstration of their progress in researching "immortality" for their investors. To make a long, complex story deceptively short and simple, the spawn escaped into a local mall, where it spawned close to forty more monsters like itself. Because most people cannot see Shadow, the mall patrons perceived the monsters simply as crazed, homicidal bums. And since they aren't bulletproof, the spawn of Kyuss fell reasonably quickly before the forces of the law.

My heroes got hold of the mall security tapes and quickly spotted "patient zero" -- the spawn that started the outbreak. They used their connections to reach the county morgue and examine the body. The personnel on duty there told them that they were certain this particular person had passed through their facility six weeks before, after someone found him dead on the street. At that point, the evidence suggested that he had died from the sorts of things that typically kill homeless people -- nothing unusual.

So far, so good. The adventure was going as planned. The heroes information the heroes received indicated that the state sincerely tried to provide dignity in death and made a serious effort to locate the relatives of indigent deceased persons before disposing of their remains.

The heroes decided to find out where the body had gone after it leaving the morgue. Based on some research and some decisions I had made for my campaign, I decided that it had gone to the medical school of a nearby college. A public relations person there explained to the heroes that the university used the bodies of indigents in remains-handling courses and then sent them to a funeral home for cremation. When the heroes explained that a corpse that should have been cremated a week ago had wound up in a shopping mall, the PR person became quite upset. The heroes picked up on his desire to protect the good name of his employer (there's that use of motivation again)and easily persuaded him to cooperate.

Next, they tried to find the person who had signed the remains over to the funeral home. At this point, I started losing control of the situation. For some reason, I hadn't anticipated that they would focus on that person, and the more evasive I became, the more my players were convinced that I was hiding something important.

Reasons

So your adventure has gone off the rails and is now headed in an unexpected direction. How did that situation occur?

Lack of Preparation: Players depend on their GMs for information about the world in which their heroes live. If the GM doesn't provide that information, they must go looking for it, and that process can lead to unexpected complications. Perhaps you've forgotten to give the heroes an important clue. (For example, I forgot to give my heroes a clue about the numbers tattooed on the chest of their victim, which weren't present at the first coroner's exam.) Or maybe they perceive some filler details you've provided as important information. Worse still, perhaps you've forgotten some event that was supposed to distract or redirect the heroes.

Too Much Preparation: Just as it's possible to approach the gaming table unprepared, it's also possible to overwrite your scenario. A good adventure shouldn't lead heroes around by the nose -- it should give them plenty of room to explore and experiment. If you've run more than two games, you know that you can't predict every possible action the heroes might attempt -- and it's really better that way. No one likes to be entirely predictable -- especially not players.

Mistakes: Even if you bring everything you need to the game session, mistakes can still happen. Your players might seize on one that leads them down a strange trail.

Responses

Now you need to get the story back on track. Below are some suggestions for doing so.

Stop: You can always call off the rest of the session and do something else during your gaming time. Though this solution seems rather drastic, it gives you the chance to spend some time between sessions thinking about what you want to do. Take a deep breath and realize that you haven't lost control -- you're just taking some time to regroup so that the game will proceed smoothly. Furthermore, you don't have to fix every problem immediately. Concentrate on the most critical problems and work from there.

Retcon: This term, which is short for "retroactive continuity," refers to rewriting history to make it fit the present. When you realize that your campaign has gone off the rails, you can either replay some past event with a few changes, or simply tell the players that they've made a wrong, strange, or unanticipated choice. Then explain what their heroes "really" experienced and see if the situation improves.

Breadcrumbs: Another option is to create a trail leading back to some element of the adventure, but not necessarily the point at which it diverged from your plans. If you're quick on your mental feet and sufficiently creative, the players may never realize that their heroes wandered off your pages.

Roll with the Punches: You can spontaneously create a new adventure. You know where it starts because the heroes are already at that point. And you know that you want this "new" scenario to end back in your original storyline. All you have to do is move from the first point to the second.

This solution is, for the most part, the one that I chose. When my heroes fixated on the guy who had signed the bodies over to the funeral home (last month), I revealed some information about him, including the fact that his name was Erik. I then allowed them to learn his address and visit his apartment. Because I knew a lot about Erik - particularly his personality and his motives -- I let the heroes to talk with his neighbors. I knew that he'd already vacated his apartment because that event was part of my original plan. The heroes' little side trek got me through the rest of that session.

Listen to Your Players: One of the best lessons I ever learned from another GM was to shut up and let my players figure the situation out. When you're at a loss for how to advance your story, be quiet and listen to your players. They may figure it out for you.

My players decided that they could find the funeral home that had received the body by following the delivery truck after it had picked up another corpse. So they went down to Erik's workplace and waited for a delivery truck. Sensing an opportunity to redirect the adventure back toward the cabal of necromancers that secretly owned the false-front funeral home, I decided that a delivery would occur a few hours later. A car chase and a brief gun battle ensued, and in the smoking remains of the delivery van, my heroes found a map and an address. Those bits of information led them to a small cemetery (I used the Global Positioning maps that [Christopher West](#) creates for [Dungeon](#) magazine). In the rear of that cemetery, they found a gate and a gravel path leading to the back of a residential house. Perfect! My players had located the necromancers' hidden lab!

Resolution

I'd like to say the story ended there, but it didn't. When they were spotted by the necromancers' guards, my heroes chose discretion. They tried the old "meter reader" routine to get closer to the house, but the guards didn't buy it (primarily because the Strong hero/Martial Artist character tried it rather than the Charismatic/Glamourist character). Fortunately, the necromancers had always been averse to attracting attention because publicity tended to upset their investors. Thus, the guards simply persuaded the hero to leave.

We took a week off from the campaign, and I spent that time hurriedly reviewing what I'd written and contrasting it with what had happened. The next session miraculously led the heroes right back into the original adventure.

Parting Shots

Even though a GM wrote this column for GMs, players should also take note of the information presented here.

Sometimes you fixate on the wrong piece of information, and the adventure stops advancing. Sometimes your GM makes mistakes. Since our hobby is about *cooperative* storytelling, you should try to work with your GM (rather than against that worthy and overworked individual) to get the plot back on track.

About the Author

Before [Rich Redman](#) came to the RPG R&D department at Wizards of the Coast, Inc., he had been an Army officer, a door-to-door salesman, the manager of a computer store, a fundraiser for a veterans' assistance group, and the manager of Wizards of the Coast, Inc.'s Customer Service department. Rich is a prolific game designer who has worked on the **Dungeons & Dragons** game, the **d20 Modern Roleplaying Game**, the **Marvel Super Heroes Adventure Game**, and **Dark*Matter**. When he's not working as vice president of [The Game Mechanics](#), a d20 design studio, Rich works fulltime, does freelance game design, cooks, and practices yoga, tai chi, and silat.

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