



Notes from the Bunker

Adventure Writing, Part 2

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, we'll finish talking about how to write adventures. We'll focus primarily on non-FX adventures for modern-era d20 games, but hopefully the concepts presented here will be applicable to writing any kind of adventure.

This column has two main sections: Process and Ideas. Process is for people who like to do their adventure preparation in advance, either for the next installment of a campaign or for publication. The Ideas section is useful both to GMs who prepare their games in advance and to those who do no preparation at all because they prefer to work off the tops of their heads.

Process

Last month we talked a little about general processes for writing. This month we'll talk about some of the specifics.

Get an Opponent

Your first step in writing an adventure is to define the opposition. The "opponent" could be a natural event, or a horde of mindless creatures, or even a criminal mastermind and her secret organization. We've spent months talking about crime, criminals, and motivation, and I encourage you to use the concepts presented in the last several columns [[url=http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=d20modern/fba/full](http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=d20modern/fba/full)]columns[[url](#)] to select and flesh out your opponent.

Yes, I said "opponent," not "villain." An opponent is not necessarily evil and is not always out to destroy the heroes. An opponent might be a well-meaning but foolish person who makes a mistake that causes a catastrophe. Or it could be someone who desperately needs money because the insurance system in America won't pay for the life-saving surgery that his lover requires. Or it could even be a terrible storm or an earthquake. So don't limit yourself by thinking "villain."

Have a Plot

For our purposes, the "plot" of an adventure is what happens if the heroes do nothing. When I worked on the *Marvel Super Heroes Adventure Game*, my boss (Mike Selinker) established a guideline that stuck with me: Write everything from the opponent's point of view. Super heroes are primarily reactive -- in general, they take no actions unless someone commits a crime. So when you're writing your plot, think as the opponent would.

Hook the Heroes

Once you've decided on your opponent and your plot, make sure you have a way to get the heroes involved. This section of your scenario is one of the most critical because it separates the background from the adventure. The portion of the story that takes place before the heroes get involved is background. I've written some very elaborate scenarios, only to discover that the heroes aren't likely to know anything is happening until the very last minute. Once in a while that kind of situation is exciting because the time pressure creates dramatic tension. But players don't appreciate that kind of stress all the time, so usually your best bet is to go back and make the plot obvious to the heroes earlier.

Breadcrumbs

Make sure you figure out at least two paths that could lead the heroes from the adventure hook to the climax. Your players may find many other, more obscure paths as well, but you need to prepare at least two trails of breadcrumbs so they have a good chance of finding and following one. And be sure to outline these two paths in your synopsis section if you're writing for publication.

Locations

We've talked about this topic in past columns, but I wanted to reiterate one key point: Your encounter descriptions should fire your players' imaginations with only a few words. You don't want to spend a lot of time describing every location the heroes see, and you don't have the luxury of a novel's space or the visual depth of a film. So make those few words count.

Little Pieces

I once found some advice that stuck with me in an old **Dragon** magazine column: Never write more than you actually need to. In fact, you should purposely avoid writing everything out in order to leave some mystery in the situation and some opportunities for expansion in other directions.

This advice is especially valuable in writing adventures. When you're working on a scenario, write only what you need for your next session, and let the rest wait. That way, when your players choose an unusual course of action, the adventure can't get too far off course.

Writing only what's necessary at the time has another benefit as well. It allows you to break a large, intimidating project down into more manageable chunks. When you finish one step, you can focus on the next, and then the one after that, and so on, until you're finished. Don't feel that you have to answer every question raised in the adventure right away.

Ideas

Stuck for ideas? Here are some sources from which you can easily pull adventure seeds.

Ask Questions

When a campaign event that could spark an adventure occurs, write down all the information you already know

about it, then fill in additional details. For example, you probably already know what happened, and where, and when. So ask yourself the following questions.

- How did it happen?
- Who did it?
- Did it really happen the way it appeared?
- Did anything else happen in conjunction with the main event?
- What events led up to this one?
- What happens next?

The News

The best places to find inspiration for modern adventures with no FX are the various news media. Current events around the globe should provide you with plenty of inspiration. When you hear about a promising event, ask yourself the following questions.

- Why did it happen?
- Who was responsible?
- If it happened in a game, what would or could be different?
- How would FX change things?

Fiction

Read fiction in the genre for which you'll be writing. If you want to write techno thriller adventures, read techno thrillers. If you want to write mysteries, read mysteries. Television and movies set in your chosen genre are also good sources of ideas. Combine this tip with some of those presented in last month's *Notes from the Bunker*, and you'll quickly have notebooks full of original ideas inspired by what you've read and watched.

The Big Secret

Every event that happens in your day can be a source of inspiration. The secret is to ask the right questions. For example, imagine that you're out running errands, and you bump into an old friend, flame, or co-worker. You thought this person had moved away, but now he's standing right in front of you. The average person thinks, "Wow, it was great seeing so-and-so again." The writer thinks, "Why was that person in that place at that time?" Then she tries to apply the answer to her next project.

But how do you do that? Well, suppose your heroes work for a top-secret paramilitary organization such as the CIA's Special Operations Group. In the town just outside their base of operations, one of them bumps into an old ally from another country -- just as you bumped into that old friend/flame/co-worker. Perhaps the old ally is secretly on the run from a corrupt government that has recently seized power in a coup d'etat. When enemy agents come hunting for him, he turns to his old friends -- your heroes -- for help. Has their government diplomatically recognized the new, corrupt government? If so, helping the ally goes against the national interests of the country your heroes have sworn to defend. How far will their government go to prevent them from helping their old ally? Can the heroes figure a way to defend their ally and still make their government happy?

Write What You Know

I purposely saved this little rule of writing for this column because it has specific applications to our work.

In the **d20 Modern** game, the setting is the world outside your window. You don't have to describe how every little thing works because your players are familiar with the world. Thus, you're already writing what you know. To capitalize on the wisdom of this rule, try to focus on places and events that you know from personal experience. Some people feel constrained or restricted by the rules of reality, and to those people I say: Break the rules. Why not? James Bond does it all the time.

My second point relates to an old saying: "I don't have to run faster than the bear, I just have to run faster than you." When you're writing adventures, you may venture into genres that are unlike your personal experiences. For example, a modern world in which dragons and spells exist is outside my personal experience. But lack of complete personal knowledge doesn't have to be a problem. Just write about subjects that you know better than your players do. Knowledge based on personal experience is best, but in a pinch, you can do enough research to cover yourself.

Let me give you two examples of what I mean. I ran an adventure in which tracing the corpse of a homeless person was a key part of the heroes' task. I spent hours on the Internet trying to find an article in which an official of some city -- any city -- explained how the remains of indigent people were handled. I found nothing, and I didn't remember at the time that the father of a friend of mine owned a funeral parlor and would probably know. Finally, realizing that none of my players were likely to know the real answer either, I just made up a reasonable-sounding process based on the ideas my research had given me. In another adventure, some strange events were occurring at an abandoned Navy base. I know almost nothing about how the Navy operates, since all my military service was with the Army. However, I knew more than my players did, and they were satisfied with the results.

Parting Shots

I suspect that some people consider non-FX modern adventures difficult to create because they're afraid to write about things they know nothing about -- afraid, perhaps, that the result will be somehow "unrealistic." Realism is both a boon and a curse, I agree. However, if you use last month's tip about killing the ferocious editor in your head, you can move beyond that fear. Focus on realistic emotions and motivations for your characters, and then take the action up a notch. You're not playing *Chores and Errands*, you're playing an adventure game.

If you can't write what you know, then write what your players don't know. You'll have to do some research to give your writing an air of verisimilitude, but the Internet makes research much easier than it used to be. Spend some time with the works of Dale Brown, Stephen Coonts, and Tom Clancy, or anyone else who writes in your chosen genre. Again, focus on realistic emotions and motivations. After all, if your heroes believe in your opponent, the rest becomes much easier.

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

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