Notes from the Bunker
# Oh, We Don't Go There!
*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, I explore some corners of the **d20 Modern**rules, create rules variants, and offer suggestions based on my experience writing and running games.

This month's topic is action scenes in games, and why they don't usually turn out like the movies.

## *It Never Fails*

The following example illustrates what often happens to the best-laid GM plans for action scenes.

**GM:** . . . suspended from the ceiling is a catwalk that runs from the door where you stand to another door about 100 feet away. Some 30 feet below the catwalk are several colossal storage vats for acid. Another 20 feet below the rims of the vats is the concrete floor.

**Player 1:**Biff Hardslab heads across the catwalk, mastercraft Colt M1911 at the ready. . . .

**Player 2:** Whoa, whoa, whoa, back the truck up! How sturdy is that catwalk? Can we see any obvious traps? Is the far door open or closed? Are there any windows on that side?

**GM [stifling a groan and making some hidden checks for the players]:** The whole building is pretty decrepit, but you don't know how long the vats have been full so you can't estimate the corrosive effect of any fumes. You can't see any bundles of dynamite, strange wires, or missing bolts or supports from where you're standing. The far door is closed. The windows on the far side have horizontal blinds, which are closed. It's a suspended catwalk, so it rattles a bit when Biff puts his foot on it. . . .

**Player 2:** Hey, wait! We stopped Biff from stepping out!

**GM:** No, you told him to stop after he said he was crossing the catwalk. He's got his pistol out and one foot on the catwalk, and now he's looking back at you and waiting.

**Player 1:** It looks safe to Biff, so. . . .

**Player 2:** Stop! Are you crazy? *Looking* safe isn't the same as *being* safe. It's a hundred feet across. It'll take 3 rounds to cross it if we walk, or longer if we're checking for traps the whole way. And anything could be hiding behind those blinds, including guys with machine guns or rifles! The whole catwalk could be one range increment for them, and it starts at four range increments for our pistols. Even Biff's 10-gauge is at four range increments for shooting across the catwalk. Anybody shooting through those windows will have cover, too. And even if we tie ourselves off to this door with rope, whoever's at the far end of the rope will swing down into a vat of acid if the catwalk breaks. Look, we'll find another way across.

**GM [throwing away his elaborate plans for a cool action scene]:** Okay, where do you go?

# *Movies versus Games*

Movie directors have a lot of tools to work with. They have control over lighting, script, setting, props, vehicles, and pyrotechnics, so all the people, cars, and weapons look cool and go where they're supposed to. In addition, directors can add special effects in post-production to make the scene look and sound cooler. Working with the editor, they can even control the pace of the scene after it's filmed.

We as GMs don't have those tools. Instead, we have a bunch of independent-minded players with no script who have invested a lot of time in building their heroes, so they rightly want to protect their creations. For the most part, they have the luxury of sitting someplace relatively safe (with a respectful tip o' my stained boonie hat from Desert Storm to all our uniformed players and GMs in harm's way overseas), and they see no need to rush into decisions. Thus, when presented with a hazardous situation, our heroes are more likely to be cautious than to act like action heroes.

# *Action Scenes*

Let's take a moment to look at the elements of a good action scene and examine how they might relate to the example game above.

### Location

Nothing helps an action scene like a cool location. *North by Northwest,* for example, just wouldn't be the same without the cornfields and Mount Rushmore. But as GMs, we're not making a movie, so we need to focus less on locations that are visually interesting and more on those that require only short, verbal descriptions to excite our players' imaginations. You know your players better than I do, so you know what's likely to thrill them.

**Example:** Biff's GM has chosen a poorly lit factory environment, which offers a lot of possibilities.

### Hazards

Hazards include opportunities for falling (such as pits, chasms, catwalks, or ledges), visual obstructions (such as darkness, fog, rain, snow, or dust), sources of potential damage (including active machinery, acid, steam, fire, falling bricks or masonry, and the like), and interesting terrain features (such as water, ice, swamp, or marsh). Any element of the setting that increases the risk of an encounter or can actively damage heroes is also a hazard. For example, 55-gallon drums of aviation fuel are immobile, but they could explode or accelerate fires, so they count as hazards. Particularly evil GMs might fail to label those drums, thus making them appear to be safe cover for heroes.

**Example:** Biff's GM has decided to build the scene around a catwalk (which could collapse) suspended above big vats of acid and, as noted above, poor lighting that dramatically reduces visibility.

### Investment

Action scenes are exciting for two reasons -- you imagine yourself in the situation, or you really like or sympathize with the character in danger. For example, the end of the movie *BladeRunner* makes me squirm no matter how many times I see it, simply because I don't like heights. On the other hand, many of the scenes in *Aliens* work because the movie does such a good job of creating sympathetic characters.

As GMs, we usually take this latter point for granted because our players are obviously invested in their own heroes, and any danger to them is likely to make the players' hearts race. But this technique can work in reverse as well. I recently ran an encounter in which kobold mercenaries had strapped a bomb to the chest of a GM character that the heroes had encountered in [Come for the Reaping](). My heroes just drove off and left him because they remembered him as unlikable!

**Example:** The players in the sample game represent two archetypes. One is controlling Biff Hardslab, a reckless action hero, and is roleplaying him to the hilt. The other is emotionally invested in his own character to the point that he's unwilling to take any risk he can avoid.

**Plot Impact**

The value of the plot should go without saying, but Hollywood seems to forget it regularly. Action scenes that don't advance the plot are like beautiful paintings viewed by someone who's starving -- they look good, but they don't satisfy. As GMs, we have to remember that every action scene risks the lives of heroes that our players have spent hours creating and playing. The payoff for such a scene should be advancement of the story -- that is, the heroes should gain information or tools that they need to move ahead.

**Example:** The sample game above doesn't include enough story for us to gauge the plot impact, but it's pretty clear that the heroes need whatever lies on the other side of the catwalk.

**Opponents**

Opponents are optional. You can have a great action scene without a single opponent if the heroes have enough hazards to overcome. Climbing a cliff in stormy weather, escaping a burning building, defusing a bomb on a moving bus, and moving through an overturned and sinking ocean liner are all great action scenes in which the only opponents are time and the forces of nature.

**Example:** The GM in the sample game above could have opponents hidden behind the closed blinds on the other side of the catwalk, or not (see Landslides, below).

# GM Options

Now that we've covered the elements of a good action scene, let's look at some things you can do during the game session to increase tension and excitement.

**Don't Do It for Them**

The Exciting Combats and Locations sections in Chapter Seven: Gamemastering in the ***d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*** offer some excellent tips for building action scenes. One particularly good option is to

put the heroes in situations that *could* become exciting action scenes and then let the players control how those scenes play out. Don't force the issue; just let events flow according to the heroes' actions. The heroes may surprise you by throwing in some cinematic touches, or they may not. If the players start wondering why the game is so *boring* after a few months, just remind them of all the opportunities you've been offering and tell them that if they want to play *action* heroes, they have to take some risks. This method may not make the game more exciting for the players, but it does save you some extensive preparation time.

**Example:** Biff's GM could easily define the scene above as "catwalk (could break) above vats of acid (Xd6 acid damage), bad lighting, closed office on far side of catwalk, possible opponents in office" and do nothing else unless the heroes decide to cross the catwalk.

## Egg Timer

As noted above, players have the luxury of time when making decisions for their heroes. You can take that advantage away from them with an egg timer, stopwatch, or the like if you wish. At the beginning of each player's turn, start the egg timer, making sure that you give every player the same amount of time to make decisions. When the time is up, the player must tell you what his hero does. If he's still thinking, then the hero does nothing during that action. Give the players less time than they've been taking, but more than they would have if the situation were occurring in real life -- 30 to 60 seconds is usually fair. This practice simulates making decisions under pressure, the way action heroes generally do.

As I've mentioned in previous installments, you shouldn't institute this kind of practice without first discussing it with your players. The ticking clock can upset some players to the point that it ruins their whole gaming experience, so make sure everyone agrees to it before using it.

**Example:** This technique probably wouldn't help our example GM.

## The Big Red LED

Back when I was working on the **Marvel Superheroes** *Adventure Game* for Wizards of the Coast, Inc., we talked a lot about the "Big Red LED" option. This plot device is to heroes what the egg timer is to players. Even if the players have all the time in the world to make their decisions, the heroes are on the clock. You can literally put a big, red LED in the game and have it count down the time until a bomb detonates, or you can use one of the following variations.

- A character is trapped in a glass tube that is gradually filling with water.
- Fire is advancing on the heroes. (The fire itself can be the timer, or the fire could be destroying the building the heroes occupy.)
- The heroes (or some people who need to be rescued) are trapped aboard a sinking ship.
- A winter storm has trapped the heroes on a mountain with no food or water.
- A patrol regularly walks an area that the heroes must access. The next time the guards pass, they will spot the heroes or note evidence of their passing.

Regardless of the method you choose for setting a time limit on the heroes' actions, make sure you do it well. Here are a couple of tips for using this technique with finesse.

First, make the time limit short. If you're afraid the heroes won't have enough time, it's probably just short

enough. If the heroes have time to take a coffee break, speed up the action in some way. For example, a guard could realize that he forgot an essential item and come back early for it, or one of the people on the mountain could suddenly reveal that she has a medical condition, or the ship could start sinking faster.

Second, give the heroes big, obvious clues that time is limited so they are not surprised when it runs out. This technique works very well with good roleplayers because they're likely to roleplay the heightened tension among the heroes while the clock ticks away the remaining moments.

**Example:** In the sample game above, the GM could stop Player 2 from explaining the situation to Player 1 out of character and insist that his hero explain it to Biff. While he does so, the GM could pointedly stare at his watch, counting the seconds while Player 2 talks. Such hints might make both players realize how much time their heroes are spending standing in an open doorway, in full view of possible marksmen, and thereby force Player 2's character to either allow Biff to cross the catwalk or find a shorter explanation. Alternatively, the GM could combine this option with a Landslide (see below) and let opponents or hazards (such as a fire) come in from behind the heroes, forcing them to cross the catwalk. In that case, they may have to worry about pursuit as well as their goals for the rest of the session.

## No Take-Backs

We all know this simple rule from countless childhood games. Essentially, once a player states a hero's actions, the hero must take those actions and cannot change her mind. When using this technique, you can ask players to write their heroes' actions down each round, or you can make everyone state their heroes' actions in initiative order, and then go around the table (again in initiative order) resolve them. This method forces players to commit to a course of action, which tends to increase their tension.

You may find that this method of play slows down your game because everyone wants to discuss the upcoming round in detail before stating hero actions. There's nothing inherently wrong with extra time, but if the game starts to bog down, see the Egg Timer technique, above.

**Example:** Biff's GM could have told Player 2 that Biff had already stepped out onto the catwalk because Player 1 said so, unless Player 2's hero physically does something to stop him (such as making a grab, which Biff might well interpret as an attack).

## Landslides

A landslide is an action scene that comes out of nowhere. For example, the heroes might be walking through a pastoral mountain valley when the cliff above them suddenly gives way, sending tons of rock down on top of them. You can prepare landslides in advance, then spring one appropriate for the location on the heroes whenever the action slows down. The key to a landslide is creating a calm, relaxed, normal scene, and then abruptly introducing violent, shocking action. The jarring juxtaposition of tranquility and action is what makes a landslide work.

**Example:** Biff's GM could use the landslide technique by emphasizing how sturdy and well maintained the catwalk is, then having opponents attack the heroes or do something to make the catwalk give way.

## Head Games

"Snakes," says Indiana Jones, "Why does it always have to be snakes?" In a later movie, we find out that his father is terrified of rats. If you know that your players, or their heroes, have specific fears, you can create particular hazards or opponents to increase tension. For example, a GM might use my fear of falling (and thus of heights) against my hero.

As GM, however, you must be sensitive to your players' emotional responses. If, for example, a player has a fear of clowns (coulrophobia), and you decide to use vampire clowns as opponents, make sure you're not pushing that player's buttons too hard. If the game gets too tense, take a break and let everyone cool down.

Example: Biff's GM is using this technique in reverse by giving Player 1 an opportunity to roleplay Biff's characteristic recklessness. Rather than giving him something to fear, the GM has given him a lure based on his hero's basic nature.

**Jump Cuts**

A jump cut lets you move from action scene to action scene without a lot of traveling, sleeping, healing, eating, and preparing in between. Your players may find jump cuts a bit disconcerting at first, so be a bit more generous with the On-Hand Objects rules (Chapter Four: Equipment in the **d20 Modern** *Core Rulebook*) and hand out plenty of healing between scenes. When used properly, this method keeps the pressure on the players and works well with the Big Red L.E.D. technique, above).

When the catwalk scene in our example game ends, the GM could employ a jump cut to leap ahead to the next scene without giving the players -- or the heroes -- time to catch their breath.

**Up the Ante**

Allow the situation to deteriorate until the heroes overcome the main opponent. Let the bad guys take hostages, set the building on fire, set off a series of explosions, bring the upper floors crashing down around the heroes' heads, fix the heroes' car so the brakes fail, or create any number of other complications. This method works very well when players think they understand the threat, only to discover that the real danger comes from somewhere else.

In the example game above, the players believe that the threat is either a collapsing catwalk or heavily armed opponents in the room on the far side. If the real threat is a toxyderm rising up from the acid vats, or monstrous spiders attacking from beneath the catwalk, the safety precautions that the heroes have taken may come to naught.

**Cliffhangers**

When using this technique, the GM gets the players to commit their heroes to a course of action, tells them "no take-backs," and then ends the game session. Until the next session, the players worry that they've overcommitted themselves or made a bad choice. The GM, meanwhile, has time to create an exciting action scene in response to the players' choices.

# *Parting Shot*

In the end, the **d20 Modern** *Roleplaying Game* is all about action and adventure, both of which involve some degree of risk. Players who refuse to allow their heroes to take risks might be happier playing *Audits and Accountants.* Action heroes should be intelligent (or at least brave and loyal), determined, and resourceful. Most importantly, they should act on what they know, not just react and observe. Players who embrace these ideas will get far more out of the **d20 Modern** game in general and their campaign in particular than those who do not.

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## 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 does freelance game design, cooks, and practices yoga, tai chi, and silat.

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