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*Chapbooks*

# Sharper Adventures in *HeroQuest* Glorantha

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# Sharper Adventures in *HeroQuest* Glorantha

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ROBIN D. LAWS

You'd think that the richness and variety of Greg Stafford's world of Glorantha would lead to scenarios that write themselves. In a surprising twist, though, those very qualities add an extra layer of challenge when presenting players with a string of situations that cohere into a compelling roleplaying storyline. Let's look at some techniques to harness that overwhelming flow of inspiration into adventures that leave your players demanding sequels.

## CORE ACTIVITY

Crisp, specific adventures take place within a clear series framework. Lay the groundwork for your initial scenario, and its follow-ups, by defining the core activity the characters pursue. This tells you who the heroes are, and what they are doing.

Examples from non-Glorantha games include:

- *1920s investigators uncover the mind-blasting secrets of the Cthulhu mythos.*
- *Freelance operatives enforce order in an otherwise lawless space frontier.*
- *Vampires struggle for power in the undead hierarchy that secretly controls the world's major cities.*
- *Plucky rebels fight a star-spanning empire in a galaxy, far far away.*
- *Superheroes protect the innocent from supervillains.*

Note the sentence structure in each case: the heroes are X, and they do Y. The subject of the sentence defines who the heroes are. The key verb tells you what they do.

Much like *Traveller*, Glorantha offers a huge range of possible core activities, implicitly requiring that the group arrives at one of them during play. Both debuted during what might be called the second wave of RPG development, which sought among other things to widen out the *D&D* experience. Where *D&D* presents a very strong default core activity, raiding dungeons, *Traveller* gave groups broader latitude to choose what they were doing. Most if not all of the PCs formerly belonged to space navies. Entering play as civilians, they might decide to be traders, explorers, mercenaries, pirates, bodyguards, xenoarchaeologists, or what have you.

*RuneQuest* went even further by leaving the “who” part of the equation up for grabs as well. Characters defined themselves by the gods they worshiped, which might belong to a number of disparate and sometimes competing cultures. Or, for that matter, species – here

you were no longer limited to a relative handful of nonhuman identities, but could be a troll, duck, morocanth or, for that matter, intelligent spell-slinging iguanadon. You could still invade and loot underground complexes, as in the Big Rubble. But the world background, with its looming wars between divine proxies, implied something bigger.

Since those early days, the range of possible core activities in Glorantha has only multiplied. Groups have set campaigns in its many regions and key historical periods. You might be:

- *key members of an Orlanthi clan, protecting its people from enemies ancient and new.*
- *trolls scavenging food for hungry relatives.*
- *dwarves seeking to restore an all-too-unpredictable world to a condition of blessed stasis.*
- *traders bridging divides between cultures, all in the name of profit.*
- *elves avenging crimes against the natural world.*
- *religious enforcers hunting heretics against the one true Malkioni doctrine.*
- *misfits and outcasts bouncing between picaresque exploits.*

Any seasoned Glorantha fan can reel off a dozen more of these at the drop of a bronze helmet. Pick one, and you've got the solid foundation for an adventure or series. Without a core activity, you risk the syndrome that strikes roleplaying games set in rich worlds – that the characters, rather than driving the action, are taken on a tour of the world's many features.

We all know the problem of agency. You don't want the heroes to become bystanders watching from a remove as the key figures of the Hero Wars go through their historically foreordained paces. But even when the players do occupy center stage and make the key decisions throughout a session, their exploits seem aimless if they're not doing something very specific that brings them into contact with the world's people, places, events and mythologies.

*Character is action. By establishing and keeping in mind the core activity, you can ensure that the heroes engage with the world in the most active possible way.*

Absent group identity and collective goal, meeting a morocanth slave trader, then a sun-crazed group of bison riders, and then a pack of salvation-seeking baboons seems colorful but not really a story. If instead the group members encounter them as a series of impediments to their core activity, the disparate events fuses into a narrative that builds as you go along, with the consequences from each contest relating to a broader whole. This remains true whether you're trying to extract taxes from them on behalf of the government, to convert them to your transcendent cult, or because each leads you a step closer to the magical poultice you need to revive your clan's dying wyter.

### **HOW TO FIND IT**

In a one-shot or standalone, you only need to define a core activity for the scenario at hand. It essentially becomes your premise. You can generally count on players to accept the core activity you throw at them as you kick off the session. This allows them to get on with the action right away. Given the time constraints of a quick session or mini-series, a clearly delineated core activity helps everyone get on with the business of moving the story forward.

If you're creating an adventure to kick off a new series, you'll be defining the core activity that will link together an entire arc of follow-up scenarios. Increase player engagement by letting them choose the core activity. Then build the adventure around that choice. In an ongoing series that lacks drive, you might kick it into high gear by retroactively zeroing in on a core activity. You might plan to let the heroes explore their corner of Glorantha, sandbox style, until they arrive at a core activity naturally. Depending on how proactive the dominant players in your group are, they might acquire their motivating force intentionally, or fall into it.

## **PREP OR IMPROV?**

*All of these techniques work whether you prepare your scenario ahead of time, or improvise it in response to player choices. HeroQuest makes the latter approach easier than it would be in, say, RuneQuest, which requires detailed game statistics that are hard to generate on the fly. But that's really a side issue.*

*If you prefer to know where you're going ahead of time, or are writing an adventure for others to run, you can still use the structural tools given here to sharpen your storytelling.*

*You can establish a single core activity as part of your adventure premise. Or you can write a scenario that supports a wide range of likely core activities, with notes on how each of them informs or changes the action.*

*Have your cake and eat it too by writing to a single core activity, then adding an appendix or sidebar laying out the adaptations the Narrator might make to fit it to a list of alternate activities.*

## **EMOTIONAL STAKES**

Either in the text of your adventure, or on the fly as you run it, add further interest by asking players to set out the *why* behind the *who* and the *what* of their core activity. Establish why the adventure matters to them. Even if they're just doing a job, their success or failure at it must exert the profoundest possible impact on their lives. If the heroes desperately care, their players will, too. Otherwise, the heroes remain impersonal cut-outs taking part in an empty problem-solving exercise.

Encourage players to phrase their characters' emotional statements in a brief first-person sentence. The heroes can all have the same default reason for performing their core activity. Contrasting or separate motivating factors add color to the proceedings, especially if they lead to low-level conflict within the group. A character's reason for engaging in the core activity might have an external component, or be purely internal.

For example, let's say the core activity is:

*"As Orlanthi champions, we protect and strengthen our clan."*

Possible emotional stakes for various members of this group might include:

- *HENGIST: "I want to be chieftain one day."*
- *BORLANTOR: "I aspire to emulate my god, who risked all to aid the Storm Tribe."*
- *GESTAN: "I want to prove that my mother was wrong about me, and that I can amount to something."*
- *ARKORA: "Doing this will bring about the lasting peace I so fervently desire."*
- *THORL: "Clan champion duty lets me do anti-social things, yet be treated as a contributor to the community."*
- *RANALLA: "I hate being bored. I need thrills like others need to breathe."*

Most of the time, players will already have worked out their heroes' motivations. Here they're simply restating them in reference to the core activity.

### **AVOIDING PREMISE REJECTION**

By setting out emotional stakes, you also avoid the problem of premise rejection. Sometimes players fall into a mindset in which they start to see their characters as resources to be protected from



harm, rather than the risk-courting protagonists of an exciting adventure tale. If someone balks when confronted by a particularly terrifying obstacle, the Narrator can bring in the emotional connection to explain why his character takes a deep breath and steps up to confront it.

*The balky player might say, “I’m not going down into that cave of chaos!”*

*To which the Narrator replies, “But you’ll do anything exciting – the more exciting the better.”*

*To which the balky player can only say, “Darn, you’re right.”*

If you follow some of my other designs, you might recognize this idea as a version of **Drives** from *Trail of Cthulhu* and *Ashen Stars*. These also remind the players to do interesting, dangerous things by having them sign up to do that during character generation. Having done this you rarely have to worry about it again. (For most players you never had to worry about it in the first place, but every so often someone forgets the point in a bout of character protectiveness.)

## **SCENARIO PREMISE**

Start your scenario proper by settling on a premise, the problem that activates the characters’ need to engage in its core activity. The heroes might fully understand the premise from the outset. In a more typical storytelling pattern, they sense only the outlines of the problem at first. By dealing with its initial manifestations, they overcome obstacles and learn more about the true problem as they go along.

Let’s say the core activity is “*Protect my Orlanthei clan.*” and the various character motivations are given as above. We’ve already mentioned a cave of chaos, so let’s make that our central problem. A fissure in the earth, inside which chaos creatures lurk, opens up in the border region between the characters’ clan and the next. This is the force the clan must be protected from this time around. In other words, our premise = chaos cave. To complete the adventure suc-

cessfully, the characters must seal off, destroy or otherwise neutralize the cave.

Having invented a premise, take a moment to consider how it relates to each character's emotional stakes. In an adventure written for others to run, include a note encouraging the Narrator to do this during play. You could suggest to the players why each of their heroes might respond to the adventure's central problem. Even better, invite each player to explain why they want to solve it. They might invoke their standard motivation, or surprise you with a new reason to engage specific to this particular situation.

When you run this introductory section, then, the players might respond as follows:

- *HENGIST: "Defeating this threat will burnish my credentials as future chieftain."*
- *BORLANTOR: "My god battled chaos, and so will I."*
- *GESTAN: "If I defeat chaos, Mother will have to admit I'm tough and smart."*
- *ARKORA: "There is no peace where chaos reigns."*
- *THORL: "I've never hit chaos creatures before. Let's go!"*
- *RANALLA: "Nothing more exciting than a battle against chaos!"*

### ***DEVELOPING THE PREMISE***

After the heroes discover the premise, prepare or improvise a scene or two in which they encounter obstacles arising from it. If the heroes know what the problem is, the first obstacle can simply be a decision-making scene in which the players decide how to start dealing with it. Otherwise, it might be one in which they gather the information they need to start grappling with it.

## CREATING AND ORDERING OBSTACLES

Certain obstacles may be implied by the premise. If the premise is a chaos cave, the first obstacle must somehow involve signs of chaos, or of the opening of the cave. Where many possible obstacles arising from the premise come to mind, decide what order they appear in. You can do this in two ways:

**Logical Progression:** Some obstacles might logically grow out of the consequences, positive or negative, of others. Place these subsidiary obstacles in chronological order, after the ones that lead to them.

**Impact:** Arrange obstacles that can appear independently of one another in ascending order, from least to most intense. Intense can mean dangerous, or moving, or startling, or visually arresting – whatever feels to you like it makes a scene a grabber.

You might use index cards to shuffle obstacle order, devoting one card to each obstacle. This method becomes useful when ordering for impact. If you always order by logical progression alone, a point form list should do the trick.

I use a virtual index card when outlining, by using ProFantasy Software's *Campaign Cartographer* for one of its unintended purposes, as a crude diagram maker. Its CAD-based design allows the easy reordering of text boxes representing each an idea. You might find another program that better fits your budget or way of thinking. (Because they're often used for business, dedicated flow chart programs remain weirdly expensive compared to other types of software.)

If you invent more obstacles than needed for a single adventure, keep the ones you don't use in reserve. Allowing for alternate or optional scenes keeps the demon dog of railroading at bay. By laying in more than one possible route to the solution of the central problem, you grant the players the chance to make meaningful

choices that dictate the story's overall shape.

When inspiration lags, think of ways to connect the premise to the common supporting character types, situations, images, and patterns of the Glorantha setting. In the end, you'll still wind up drawing on the cool world elements that make you want to play in Glorantha. This way, though, they'll all serve the central premise, creating a whole that exists as more than the sum of its parts.

### **POINT OF NO RETURN**

Roleplaying permits a structural looseness you'd never get away with when plotting a novel, movie, or TV episode. In fact, looseness works. It gives the players room to insert their own choices and surprises in between your obstacles. Having established your core activity, emotional stakes and scenario premise, a collection of obstacles, some directly connected to each other, which lead to a likely climax may well be all you need.

That said, you can sometimes get satisfying results by pulling from common structures of other forms. Movies, for example, often keep their hold on our attention with act changes. These add momentum, intensity and variety by sending the story in a new direction.

The first act change in a movie can often be encapsulated as a Point of No Return moment.

- *Ilsa arrives at Rick's place in Casablanca.*
- *Luke meets Obi-Wan.*
- *Jeff accidentally blinds an innocent bystander (The Killer).*
- *Frodo and the gang realize the Nazgul are after them.*
- *Peter Parker gets bitten by the genetically altered spider.*

Here the protagonist's situation is altered forever. He can no longer go back to the previous status quo; he can only move forward, toward a resolution.

The Point of No Return often follows an introduction that establishes the main character's status quo, generally one of stasis or stagnation. This doesn't work so well in roleplaying, which tends to follow the iconic hero pattern in which the leads solve problems on an episodic basis. These stories tend to start with the hero encountering the problem and setting out to solve it. The Point of No Return pulls him deeper into a problem he has already been actively solving almost since the outset.

In our example adventure, the Point of No Return might be the arrival at the cave, where the heroes find definitive proof that chaos stalks their clan lands. Now they can't putter off to deal with some other subplot or story thread. They've uncovered a true emergency, and must set aside all other concerns to address it, or die trying. Further obstacles follow the Point of No Return moment, invented and ordered just as you did the ones that led from the premise to here.

### **ESCALATION**

The third act twist in a screenplay escalates the action to another level. The situation turns out to be even more serious than previously understood. Or the bad guys make their big move. Or the hero recovers from his lowest point, rallies, and heads out to initiate the final confrontation. Whatever the details, the escalation marks a tumble of incidents leading like a slide to the big climax.

- *The attack on the Death Star.*
- *Mount Doom.*
- *The final battle with Mordred.*
- *Hamlet agrees to duel.*
- *Closing arguments in the big court case.*

In an adventure, the third act twist is a big obstacle that changes the situation and puts in play the forces that will contend with each other in the climax. This might impose very high resistances, allowing for the heroes to enter the next oscillation of the Pass/Fail Cycle

on the upswing. All obstacles after the escalation flow from one another. The choices that matter have all been made. Now it's time for the heroes to pay the costs that come with them – or better yet, make their enemies pay.

In our example, the most obvious escalation would be the discovery that the cave houses a bigger and badder chaos beastie than previously imagined – and that there is no one to fight it but the heroes. Sometimes players want exactly the most obvious choice. All along, the presence of a chaos cave has implied a huge battle against a nasty monster. Here's where you give it to them. Sometimes players prefer a surprise to the thing they expected all along.

Other escalations might be:

- *the discovery that the heroes' neighbors summoned the chaos cave, and that the real final boss villain is the chieftain next door.*
- *the big bad chaos creature freeing itself from the cave and lopes off to attack the clan hall.*
- *the decision to seal the cave by undertaking a heroquest.*

## **RESOLUTION**

In any adventure, the resolution is the final obstacle allowing the heroes to claim victory and conclude the scenario. Relatively simple adventures make the nature of that obstacle obvious from the outset.

- *Save the Earth consort from his hostage-takers.*
- *Steal the everlasting turnip from the Mostali vault.*
- *Show the Lunar authorities the consequences of not paying their debts to the Black Horse Troop by attacking the palace in Sartar.*
- *Convince the conclave to adopt your faction's theological reforms.*

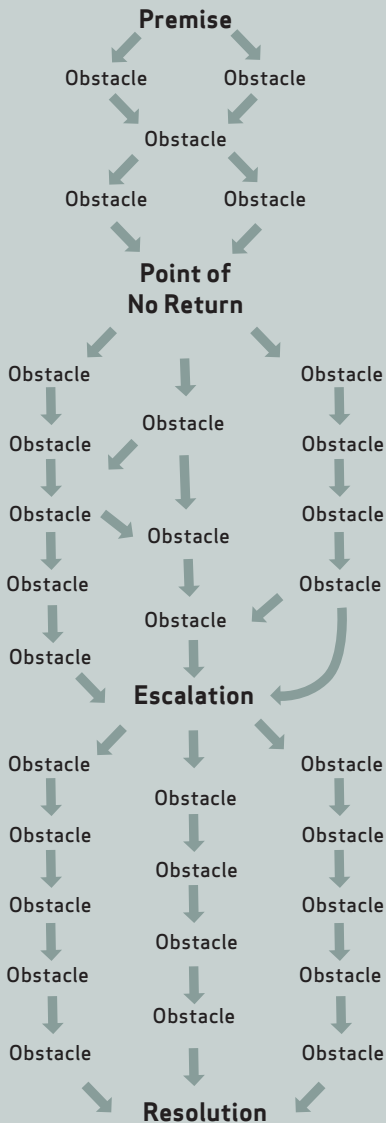
Other adventures might offer several alternate climaxes. Player choices dictate which one occurs. The climax that plays out might be completely different from the one the adventure author planned,

because the players came up with their own inventive solution to the central problem.

- *Save the Earth consort from his hostage takers or, if your attempt fails and they kill him, find a new candidate for Earth consort and get the priestesses to accept him as suitable.*
- *Steal the everlasting turnip from the Mostali vault, or the crates full of tinned food from the Mostali storeroom, or the regenerating tree from the Aldryami glade, or the sheep herds of the Genadari clan.*
- *Show the Lunar authorities the consequences of not paying their debts to the Black Horse Troop by killing a member of the royal family, or raiding a trade caravan, or striking a deal with a rival power.*
- *Get your reforms adopted by convincing the conclave, or getting the king to intimidate them into agreeing, or by making a demonstration of magical power.*

Whatever the climactic moment winds up being, the Narrator, aided by the scenario writer, uses all the tools at her disposal to grant this climactic moment scale and intensity. By allowing a suspenseful extended contest of any ability, *HeroQuest* makes it easier than other game systems to completely reconceive a climactic sequence on the fly. Written adventures generally can't make the space to fully flesh out the range of possible final showdowns. Your scenarios for publication can however include sidebars to list a few radically different conclusions. As a Narrator, you can think ahead to anticipate alternate ending sequences, making marginal notes as needed.

*The example map shows the four milestone story points of the three-act structure, and how various pathways between obstacles might connect them. No two scenarios will have the exact same configuration of obstacles. At the table, players choose some obstacles and not others. Their choices introduce new obstacles the Narrator must improvise on the spot.*

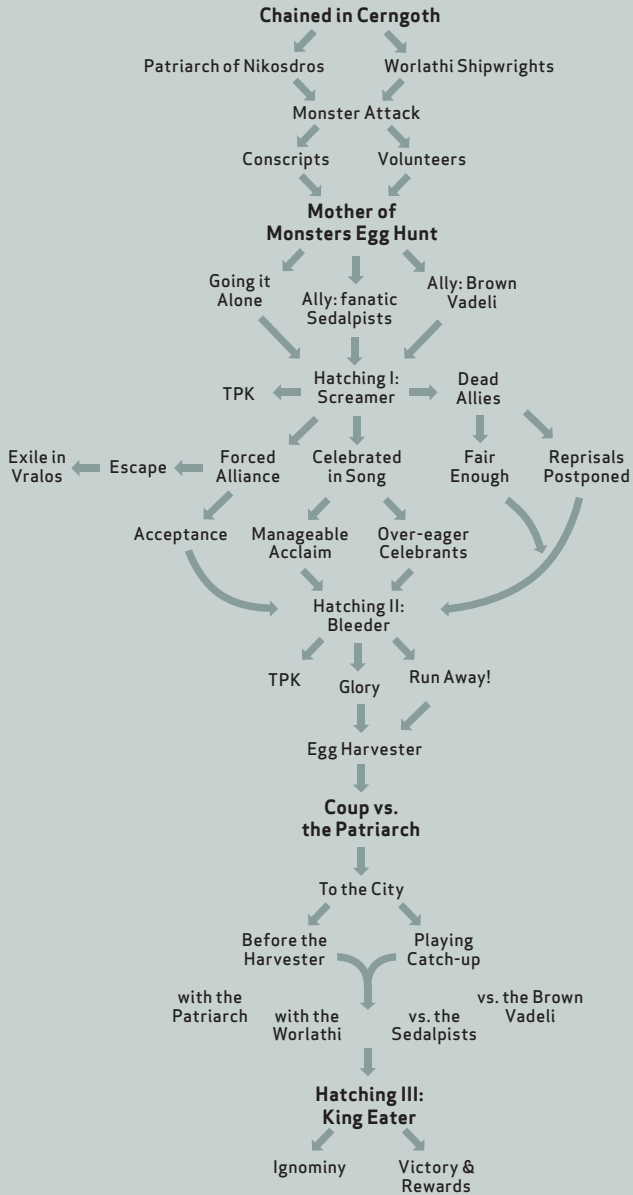


From the **Premise**, the heroes may have multiple ways to kick off the adventure, choosing to tackle obstacles that move them toward their goal. They can skip obstacles or circle back to tackle as many of them as they can find.

After the **Point of No Return**, they may find themselves on one of several possible paths, each composed of linked obstacles. Some crossing of paths may still be possible.

Obstacles lead tightly to one another after the **Escalation**. Choices already made have narrowed the heroes' options.





## THREADED STRUCTURE

Even when properly nonlinear, published adventures tend to stick to a single storyline. Including useful support for one plot eats up enough space as it is. In improvised play, especially during an ongoing campaign, players often wind up tackling largely unrelated problems in parallel. This gives you a threaded structure similar to an ensemble serial TV show like *Game of Thrones* or *Mad Men*. The heroes may split up into smaller groups or act entirely individually, advancing various agendas. Each represents one thread of a complex ongoing narrative.

Now and then the threads cross each other: Claudia's character goes off to the mountain to petition a shaman for a powerful charm, while Philippe's character remains at the tula in an attempt to rebuild the ancestor shrine. Meanwhile, Fabian and Camille's characters decide to go off on a bandit suppression run. Claudia's hero might come back with her charm and bump into the bandits Fabian and Camille's characters are hunting down.

*How a specific adventure might map out using the three-act structure. In this one, the heroes wind up on the shores of Pamaltela and decide to eke their way out of trouble by taking on the chaotic spawn of the Mother of Monsters. As they track its eggs through the jungled wilds, they uncover a plot to send one of the titanic hatchlings rampaging into the city of Nikosdros in hopes of deposing its patriarch. As with any adventure, players will steer clear of certain optional obstacles, and introduce others by making decisions the text cannot anticipate.*

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This mode requires less in the way of a defined structure than play centered around group effort. If each player feels that his thread moved definably in one direction or another, that's probably enough to keep everyone happy. Able to pursue individual goals, players create emotional stakes simply by deciding what to do next. When players pursue low-drama agendas, the Narrator might realize that they've found the degree of investment they prefer. Some players wind up more satisfied in the long run if you take their simple pursuits and up the ante, adding suspense and danger the character didn't knowingly seek.

If you and your players improvise easily,

threaded structures generally take care of themselves. In place of a written adventure, the Narrator might come to the table with a few potential directions for where each thread might go. Savvy players think ahead, too, working out where they want to drive their threads – or whether they prefer to drop them in favor of new ones.

Although this style lies outside the main focus of this Chapbook, it bears acknowledgment as a rewarding alternative to the preplanned, focused adventure.

### **MODIFYING EXISTING ADVENTURES**

When reading an adventure you may note that it doesn't use the structures discussed here. You may find it beneficial to build them into it after the fact.

#### **TAILOR TO YOUR CORE ACTIVITY**

Even a scenario that uses an core activity might not match the one you've chosen for your series. Taking your core activity as a starting point, look for a way to add it to the adventure at hand, or to modify the assumed activity to fit yours.

Let's say that the heroes are Aldryami avenging crimes against the natural world. You pick up a published adventure featuring a raid on Cragspider's lair. It assumes that the heroes are typical wandering mercenaries who get hired by a patron to stage the assault. "*You are a bunch of wandering mercenaries.*" is a default core activity you might find in any adventure. Where it occurs, you can treat it as a placeholder for the more specific idea you and your players have settled on. Replace the opener with one in which the heroes discover that Cragspider has committed a crime against the natural world. This knowledge leads them to an opportunity to strike back against her by attacking her lair.

A scenario written for a more specific core activity can also be adjusted to fit your needs. Maybe you're poaching the assault on Crag-spider's lair adventure from a Mostali campaign pack. The original features dwarf heroes seeking to return the world to stasis. Replace the scene where the Mostali heroes learn about a chance to add inertia to Glorantha by attacking Cragspider by the one above, where Aldryami heroes learn about a chance to land a righteous blow on behalf of the plant world.

### **ADD EMOTIONAL STAKES**

Sometimes you'll find it simpler to keep an adventure's generic "*wandering freebooters*" core activity. You might be running a one-shot, or a short series. Your players may want to play in a classic style reminding them of their *RuneQuest* salad days. Each player might want to play a character from a wildly different culture, requiring you to go with the simplest possible common denominator: loot and glory.

Sharpen this approach by making sure the heroes have a strong reason to want to succeed at this particular mission, as opposed to any other random assignment they might stumble across. Ask the players to specify why this might be. Or introduce the adventure with a prefatory sequence in which they find personal reasons to complete its goals. You might find a motivation that fits everyone, or several different ones keyed to the disparate heroes.

A look at the group's character descriptions will almost invariably lead you to strong emotional stakes. Glorantha helps you out here; every cult affiliation implies a set of goals, as do cultural allegiances. The stronger the hooks in each description, the easier time you'll have fitting them to the premise. If you can't see any reason why a particular hero would do anything, that character either isn't drawn vividly enough, or the player has an idea but hasn't quite expressed it yet. Talk to the player to get a better sense of what spurs the character to action, and why.

Alternately, create opening scenes in which the heroes learn how the mission stokes their desire for justice, redemption, glory, respect, mythic communion or whatever it is they happen to pursue. Even if you can count on the heroes to care about the mission, showing is more powerful than telling. Instead of having a wood nymph show up to tell them of the importance of attacking Cragspider, they come across a dying wood nymph being eaten by a pack of Cragspider's trolls.

*(Apologies to any Cragspider partisans out there. It's just an example.)*

### **SHARPENING THE INTRO AS A PLAYER**

Though the above tips work for Narrators, players can always assume their responsibility for making the game more fun for everybody. If introduced to an adventure that doesn't do much to emotionally engage the heroes, find a reason to care. Remind yourself what your character wants and seek cues from the Narrator to connect the adventure premise to those aims. If stumped, ask yourself what, if it were true, would make you want to fulfill the mission. Then ask your Narrator some leading questions to help you connect the dots.

*"I'm a trader, and I want to open up safe caravan routes in Dragon Pass. I don't suppose I've heard that Cragspider has been interfering with commercial travel, have I?"*

An alert and collaborative Narrator will grab the ball you've helpfully thrown her and say, "*Absolutely!*" Even if her notes say nothing about Cragspider messing with traders.

Sometimes even the most sagacious Narrator fails to pick up a hint. Or your suggestion might contradict another plot point she needs to establish. Ideally she'll still give you a "*No, but...*" response that will lead you to a way of making the mission personally matter to your character. If not, don't be shy about directly explaining what you're looking for: "*I'm not sure why I would care about this. Any suggestions?*"

## CHOOSING CORE ACTIVITY AS A PLAYER

*To back up a bit, during character creation you can also do your part as a player to see that the group engages in a rich, specific core activity that will inspire adventures you care about.*

*If you notice that everyone has created disconnected characters, ask them to help figure out what common purpose unites them.*

*While you're at it, look for reasons to care about the other characters. That way, when one hero wants something, you have instant motivation to help – he's your comrade, so of course you want him to get his vengeance, or his glory, or whatever else it is he seeks.*

*Make it evident that you're doing this. Collaborative players will see what you're doing and follow suit. Evident bonds between characters give you room to turn even a routine adventure into a memorable one. That random battle with the dragonewts takes on a new dimension if you're worried for your boon companion, or hoping that the rival for your sweetheart's affections gets himself clawed.*

## **MORE ON OBSTACLE CREATION**

Together the premise, Point of No Return, escalation, and resolution comprise your adventure's structure. As mentioned already, the middle two items are optional.

Structure is just a supporting framework for the incidents that test the heroes. That's why we call it structure. Ideally, players won't spot it. After each session, you want them to instead remember the obstacles they confronted, how they tried to overcome them, whether they prevailed or were set back, and what happened as a result. When players notice the structure, it's a sign that they've disengaged. Because GMing is tough work, and the consensual illusion of RPG storymaking is delicate, a player who does see the structural wheels and pulleys turning will have the good grace not to call them out. Frown vigorously at anyone who says, "*Hey, this must be the escalation!*"

Obstacles serve as stepping stones. Player choices dictate which ones they use to navigate their way from premise to resolution. Memorable obstacles challenge them intellectually, emotionally, or both. The best ones lead in at least two directions, depending on the grit, smarts and luck the heroes muster when tackling them.

To better understand how to sharpen them, let's break obstacles down into their component elements.

***Dilemma:*** Text for the Narrator, which she will paraphrase for her players, describing the nature of the problem.

***Choices:*** What meaningful decisions do the players make in tackling the obstacle?

***Consequences:*** What happens if the heroes succeed? If they fail?

**Rooting Interest:** What impact, if any, might the obstacle have on the inner journeys of one or more characters?

## **DILEMMA**

This entry introduces the players to the obstacle briefly, but with enough detail to provide atmosphere and context.

For example:

*“You see that the road ahead of you is blocked by a party of heavily armored guardians. Some of them wield longbows, ready to pick off anyone who might try to run around them into the woods.”*

*“The king emerges from his tent, his face a mask of drunken fury. He’s waving his mace and growling that he’s going to personally execute the hostages.”*

*“Ahead in the city square you see a troop of morocanth slaves. They might be the ones who captured Joris.”*

## **CHOICES**

Compelling obstacles give the players choices that matter.

Because *HeroQuest* uses custom abilities, you’re already more than halfway there. By deciding what abilities they’ll use and how they’ll apply them, players get to make creative choices. For example, the heroes might try to calm down the raging king with flattery, distraction, the Mastery rune affinity, among other possibilities. Particularly commonplace obstacles require less imaginative responses. Intersperse them with unusual or surprising problems.



Choices become richer when they allow for numerous solutions, each of which gives success a different meaning. You needn't select a single choice as the right or best answer. Glorantha doesn't offer easy choices. Good and bad remains a matter of cultural perspective. Admirable figures can fail ignominiously; the cruel often rise to the top. Choices confronting the players can reflect this in microcosm. They can be trade-offs, with each option bringing its own advantages and drawbacks. Instead of the perfect solution, the heroes must choose the murky one they can best live with.

- Fighting the guards will get the heroes in trouble with the authorities. But not fighting them will lose them the respect of their supporters, who are spoiling for a scrap and don't think about political fallout.
- Letting the king kill the hostages will cement his affection for the heroes. But that will kill the peace deal the heroes have been working on.
- Dealing with the morocanth while they're in the city will make violence more costly if the group has to resort to it. But if they wait until they leave and confront them in the wilds, they risk losing track of them.

Doing this every time can be wearying. Sometimes a simple problem the heroes can address without thought gives you exactly the rhythm you need. In Pass/Fail Cycle terms, having to make a complicated choice can be as taxing as a key failure. An easy choice can provide emotional uplift similar to a success.

## **CONSEQUENCES**

Though *HeroQuest* discusses consequences in depth, we can always stand to think more about this tricky element of roleplaying storytelling.

We can divide consequences into two types: **Modifiers** and **Branches**. A branch determines which of several incompatible upcoming scenes occurs, as determined by success or failure – or in some cases, degrees of success or failure.

*Victory:* The heroes get past the guards. *Marginal or Minor Defeat:* The heroes are driven off and must choose another route. *Major or Complete Defeat:* The heroes are captured and taken before a tribunal.

*Victory:* The king relents and puts the heroes in charge of ensuring the hostages' safety – from himself most of all. *Defeat:* The king murders the hostages, leading to an angry confrontation with the enemy camp's negotiators the next day.

*Victory:* The heroes find the morocanth slaver party out in the wilderness, and can attack them without legal complication. *Defeat:* The heroes lose the slavers, and must make a deal with greedy outlaws in order to locate them.

A modifying consequence doesn't determine whether an upcoming scene occurs or not. It does, however, alter how a particular upcoming scene plays out. Usually, this makes one or more contests undertaken in the scene harder or easier. Use of this consequence type limits branching, allowing you to contain your preparation to a non-infinite number of scenes. Yet it still gives the players the sense that their victories and defeats matter, as they evidently reverberate in later sequences.

You decide that there's nothing fun about having the heroes kept from their destination if they fail to defeat the guards. Instead of a possible branch where they get hauled before a tribunal, you instead decide that they bypass them on a victory or a defeat. But on a victory, they earn the fear of other members of

the guard corps, while on a defeat, they leave behind a purse full of gems, making it harder to bribe their way to success in subsequent scenes.

Strive for a mix of branching consequences, which alter the storyline in a big way, and modifying consequences, which give weight and meaning to previous successes and failures.

Surprise player choices may mean that in actual play the consequences you anticipated for an obstacle go by the wayside, replaced by story branches you didn't foresee. Roll with this when it happens; it shows that the players have agency and that their decisions matter. Sometimes you may feel that a consequence of unexpected actions robs them of the chance to take part in a cool upcoming scene you had planned. Remember that cool scenes are a renewable resource. Keep it in mind as they go off in their unexpected direction. If you wait long enough, you'll often spot a smooth, logical way to place it in front of them, now transformed by what they did previously.

### ***ROOTING INTEREST***

As viewers or readers of traditional entertainment, we engage with the action when we care whether the protagonist succeeds or fails. We hope for his success and fear for his failure.

Players engage when they care about the obstacles they're trying to overcome. When designing an obstacle, check to make sure that they have reason to care about its outcome. The chance to participate in a roadside archery tournament won't excite them much, unless you make it clear how they stand to benefit from success, or how it might hurt them if they don't enter and win.

By specifying a rooting interest, you promote an obstacle from a casual opportunity to do something, to a choice that matters to the heroes' lives.

In Glorantha we can sometimes forget the need for a rooting interest when we give players the chance to interact with established figures and places. If you want the heroes to outwit Bundalini, proprietor of the famous Skeleton Band, remember to build an obstacle around him, one that will mean something to them, whether the encounter moves them forward or sets them back.

When obstacles all relate to the same adventure premise, the rooting interest entry can get repetitive. After establishing it, you can resort to shorthand. The first sentence in the example entry below might eventually be abbreviated to “*Hurts Stormpeaks*.”

### **EXAMPLE**

An obstacle written in this format looks like this:

***Dilemma:*** The heroes need the allegiance of the duck village to push back against the expansion of the rival Stormpeak clan. But the ducks worry more about banditry than the clashing ambitions of local Orlanathi.

***Choices:*** They might win over the ducks by coercion, the payment of tribute, rational persuasion, or by attacking the bandits. Or they might decide that the favor of ducks isn’t worth currying: maybe they could instead court the bandits as an ally against the Stormpeaks.

***Consequences:*** Success recruiting the ducks adds their aid to a battle sequence with the Stormpeaks later in the scenario. Success recruiting the bandits does the same, though is less likely to succeed due to the fickleness and cowardice of the outlaws compared to the indefatigable Durulz. This is a modifying consequence.

***Rooting Interest:*** Everyone in the group hates the Stormpeaks. Also, by gaining an ally against them, they'll win the approval of their elders back home.

In additional text, you can then go on to flesh out whatever you need about the duck village, its leadership and their needs, as well as the bandits: who they are, what they want, and so on.

When writing adventures you might find it instructive to literally present obstacles in this format. Or you might prefer simply to keep these elements in mind as you write in the traditional quasi-fictional style we're all familiar with from years of reading published adventures. Writing in format clarifies your thinking and ensures that you have all the elements in place, but may be less fun for others to read. Conversely, tightly formatted entries like this make adventures less fun to read for pleasure, but easier for Narrators to reference during play.

## **SUMMATION**

*To recap, use the following steps to punch up Gloranthan HeroQuest adventures.*

- 1** Define the group's **Core Activity**.
- 2** Establish **Emotional Stakes**.
- 3** Structure the adventure with a **Premise** and a **Resolution**, possibly connected by act breaks: the **Point of No Return** and the **Escalation**.
- 4** Connect these points with **Obstacles**, consisting of:
  - a) **Dilemma**
  - b) **Choices**
  - c) **Consequences**
  - d) **Rooting Interest**



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