

PREPARING SCENES



Introduction

Having just finished reading “Return of the Lazy DM” by Mike Shea, I started an introspection to my planning method and how it relates to running a successful game session.

I’ve obviously gone through dozens of different styles and variations throughout the years like most game masters. Some of the styles have focused on having strong character focus, others have a focus on narrative and story-arc etc. Now I’ve kind of made a full circle.

What I’ve come to learn is that trying to write “static entities” is not the most optimal preparation vs. improvisation investment. By this I mean working out NPCs and locations beforehand and then figuring out action and scenes on the fly as the story unfolds. While it often works in satisfactory manner, I’ve felt the story would have been even more memorable if there had been a more profound connection between – well, everything.

This has made me come back to the roots of writing scenes but with a revelation that focusing on scenes with all the learnings of improvisation and preparation in general, it is a completely different approach altogether. It’s no wonder why a movie script is all about the scenes, their importance, order and eventually, if they are included in the final story or not. And a game session is not about following the script – it is the script writing process enacted.

This article is for veteran game masters clearly. It is raw, concise and does not explain all that much and as such, assumes state of the art knowledge of the craft, using as the benchmark what Mike Shea describes in his outstanding publications for example. For these reasons, it did not apply my usual nominal price but made this available for free.

Writing scenes for improvised play

As a community, we’ve wanted to veer away from writing adventures in a rigid scene structure format because the game is not supposed to go according to a plan in the first place. However, did we in that process also become a little too scared of writing scenes altogether?

I have a pretty good grasp on what I write before a session and how it will likely go down in a session. I guess my players are predictable and willing to work with me. Most of the time I can trust them to kill anyone raising their suspicion as their default way of handling things. This knowledge I can use to trick them sometimes to act against their own interests.

By knowing my players, I can assume more and prepare less. That’s an asset of course. I have an idea of how they typically approach challenges and their individual roles and styles. By knowing them as players and as a player group, I’m already prepared.

Using this foundation, I can focus on the good stuff: writing interesting stories and potential scenes that fit my idea of the story. And my players can trust that as I know their preferences, I have always something prepared just for them.

The secret sauce

We all praise movies like The Sixth Sense, Fight Club, The Village etc. for their unremarkable way of telling you a story and then revealing the story you were just told was actually quite different and it still all makes sense. And that’s what we want from our role playing adventures and campaigns from time to time, to be amazed and wonder a tapestry of an elaborated plot and how it all worked out in the end.

I've already described the idea of *active contradiction* in planning in my earlier publications like *Free Association Story-Plot Method* and *Adventures Design in Practice*. Exploring this principle in the mentioned movie plot examples, I've highlighted the core concept that was put to question at the plot twist moment. Note that often it is the one that you would least suspect thus making it most impactful. I've also written my own twist variants that are arguable *worse* than what the movie feature due to choosing a more conventional target for the plot twist.

So, SPOILERS ahead if that was not obvious.

- The Village
 - synopsis : A **18th** century small town sends out a girl on a dangerous mission to seek for help in their murder mystery
 - original twist: The town lives in isolation in 21st century era
 - twist variant: The girl is not send out on a mission but exiled instead under a secret plot
 - twist variant: There is no murder at all, it is all staged to allow certain characters to rise in power
 - an absurd twist variant: the town is actually a living being with humans as its parasites
- Fight Club
 - synopsis: a man suffering from narcolepsy meets **another man** and they form together an unground movement
 - original twist: the two men are the one and the same
 - twist variant: it was all his narcolepsy-infused dream (oh how boring that would have been..)
 - twist variant: the anarchy is actually coordinated by government higher-ups
- The Sixth Sense
 - synopsis: a psychiatric **has** a eccentric child patient who **claims** to see ghosts
 - original twist: .. and he can – including the ghost of the man who is his psychiatric
 - twist variant: the child is no longer a child – it is all events in the past

Out of the three examples, I give best points on The Sixth Sense due to being able to connect two secrets in the same frame. The role of doctor-patient is not as it seems and that is explained by even more profound but well-established plot twist of which of the characters are living in the first place.

In regards to a twist or a plot twist, they **are moments of secrets coming to play**, nothing else. When you write your secrets and they enter the game, they have a potential of providing a twist.

Coming back to game mastering and planning and running games, when preparing to run an improvised game, you will need to be able to contradict any belief, even the ones you just yourself introduced.

Writing scenes – and only scenes

The method I describe loses potential if you consider it “in addition” to other styles of planning. If you would write characters and NPCs separately prior to engaging with scene-centric design, you would simple restrict yourself or produce duplicate and inconsistent designs.

The key is to write a scene after another and stick to scenes only. The characters, their motivations, real identities etc. all come via this process. Yes, you can and should have ideas of what you are wanting to write about, but the actual written down material is about scenes.

A scene is like a glue between characters and their goals. Characters that don't have any scenes written for them or their goals don't have clear impact on the plot are left in the vacuum. This is why an alternative

character preparation is not productive – that material would not have a logical scene connection. Also, I argue it produces less flexible game play overall.

For example, taking an all-time banal evil wizard character. Is he even evil? Only if scene 8b is enacted. Or is he even a wizard? Well not if scene 14c takes place. What did drive him to be evil in the first place? That depends on a result of scene 6. And is the story even about him? No, according to scene 28 it is actually his daughter who is the real nemesis. Or ultimately, does he even exist? There's a chance he does not and the story is about completely something else.

Now if your immediate reaction is “oh my god, he is suggesting me to write tons of variants of every element of play – that's not what I came for in the first place!”, please remain calm. You really only write for your next session and then some. That's probably a 10+ index cards for 4 hours of play perhaps. You only produce the amount you think you can consume. And all the stuff you did not write, you are well equipped to improvise that too. Read on please.

Not all scenes will happen and all scenes don't happen as they were written

Just as a reminder: scenes you write will not all happen. They are purely your inventory for potential scenes in actual play. As such, there is a state of flux in and between the game sessions, just as we like it to be to consider our games “dynamic” and “interesting”.

A well-deserved side-effect of preparing scenes is the increased capability to improvise scenes that were not written beforehand. If you have considered five different variants of how the nemesis may approach the final encounter, you are able to come up with a few more on the fly as well. Preparation increases flexibility of improvisation when done correctly.

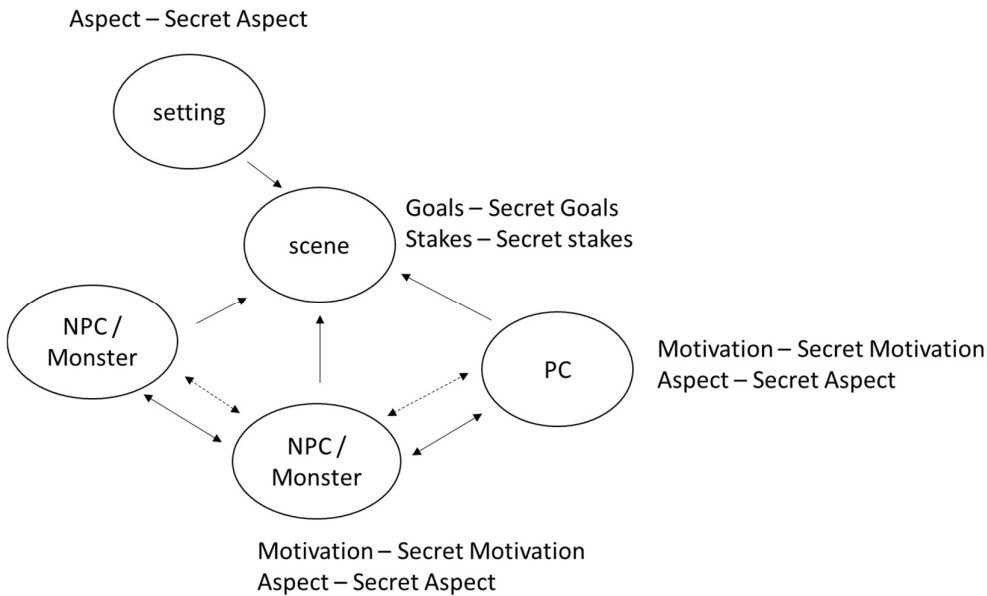
The idea is to write scenes that *could* happen. This core principle can be applied to any scene, from a starting scene to a big finale. All of them can have variants in stock and again, all of the variants do not have to be prewritten.

When it comes to variants of the same baseline scene, I find it easier to write complete variants instead of twists and variants inside a scene. This makes it easier to question any element of the scene, coming back to my movie plot analysis previously. However, there is a build-in drive for secrets, twists and contradiction in my format of preparation to ensure this important aspect is never overlooked.

A scene on an index card

As a planning and a game aid format, 3x5 index cards have become quite popular. They are like game master's little cue cards. Their brevity and modularity is inherently driving flexibility to running games. But what is written onto those cards in the first place?

In essence, if the index card holds a scene for a roleplaying game, it describes the interaction of PCs in a setting with other characters or the setting itself. The visual structure of the elements, their attributes and relationships could look like this:



However, a tabular format may be more practical when writing an index card and that I've used in my examples below.

Exploring the anatomy of the presented scene structure:

- A scene often consists of one or multiple NPCs or factions or monsters, interacting with the PCs and with each other.
- The apparent motivation of an NPC is written as the PCs are experiencing it, supported by game master exposition suggesting that is the truth.
- The secret motivation is the true motivation however – but only if you consider the secret to be true at the time of game play. This is important. The secret is not fixed. As a game master, you can choose on the fly to consider the apparent, original motivation as the true motivation instead. Otherwise, this would become formulaic and players would always expect a twist in every character motivation they come across.
- The same approach applies to character relationships – there is apparent relationship and a potential secret one. This secret may be one-way or two-way i.e. both characters share the secret or only one side has a secret agenda.
- When writing *aspects*, the same principle is applied again. Aspects are way of describing an interesting key detail that defines a character or a location. And once again, all that appears may not be true...
- The scene itself has to contain action (and often tension and drama) involving the characters and the setting. This can be described as goals and stakes and once again, their secret variants.
- Last, but not least, PCs themselves can be addressed with the similar method. It is not about choosing for players what their motivation and potential secret is but seeing the PCs from the eyes of NPCs. Are the PCs like they appear or not to various NPCs is a strong dynamic to explore.

Ok, enough abstraction. Example time.

Sample scenes

My sample scenes are actual next session material in the spirit of practical advice. I believe it is fair that if I'm describing a method I personally use that I also show a real application of it.

For some background, this is continuation of what was described in *Adventure Design in Practice* publication (yes, we had a long hiatus). Not needing to know any details as such, the loosely flowing campaign is about a town near a Pictish (Conan the Barbarian) frontier with intrigue and plotting of various sorts in the local political landscape, involving power mongering, mystic arts and sheer brutality. The players are up against the town authority figure, a dirty opportunistic merchant, and are fighting to free themselves from his persecution as they happened to accidentally meddle in his plans earlier. Last session ended with players bringing down a tower of a local religious sect, one thought to be in league with the merchant.

The larger secret theme is that the most characters are shades of grey while players have clearly divided them into allies and enemies. In reality, it is more of a survival of the fittest with shifting morals and there are no real good and evil men.

Please note that the examples are not meant to explain my entire campaign setting. They only work as examples of the technique and related formatting. I've provided some editorial notes just for this purpose, to explain my motivations (real ones, not false motivations – ha, I'm getting consumed by this idea) why certain elements are fun and exciting to consider. Also, I'm slightly more verbose than I would be for purely personal needs.

Example 1: starting scene for the session

What	Apparent	Secret
Setting	A winter forest, party on the run with the tower burning behind them and town guard with tracking dogs on their trail.	-
PC goal	To flee to safety with the help of the prisoner they just rescued, the leader of the local rebels hiding in the woods.	-
PC stakes	If they get caught, they will face a serious threat and could be exposed to mercy of nefarious individuals.	-
NPC Prisoner goal	To escape with the help of PCs and have them ideally join the ranks of the rebels to fight a common foe.	He pretends to be more of a good guy than in reality he is.
Setting	A gleaming-eyed wolf stares from the distance the PC group.	It is a shape-shifter spy doing the bidding of his master, The Lady of Khitai.

Now, that would be all I need to get the *in media res* with direct continuity from our previous session. It has action and mystique enough for the first scene. It is very likely to go in PCs favor and I can trust a few other scenes to happen as a result. If not, I'm prepared to have a different type of session as well, improvising more around my "knowledge" of the overall campaign setting. That is to say, there is a whole lot already happened that I can build upon if required.

This example featured relatively little secrets however, let's try to write one emphasizing more of this duality.

Example 2: a foreign visitor arrives

What	Apparent	Secret
NPC Visitor goal	A Khitai sorcerer arrives in town, invited obviously by his kin The Lady of Khitai, wife of the powerful merchant.	The sorcerer has an agenda to meet with a Pictish shaman and make him help him in this “transformation”
NPC Visitors aspect	A large flying drake accompanies the sorcerer, as his pet and his bodyguard.	It is more than a pet – it is the other half of his soul and if he gets his will, also will be part of his body.
NPC Lady Khitai goal	There is not known publicly why the foreign visitor comes to town but it is big news obviously.	She has invited a powerful ally to help to consolidate her power and elitist cultural ideals how she wants to shape the local region.

I leave it to that purposefully. Note that it does not describe at all the PCs – I’m willing to leave that part completely open without making any assumptions. Nor does it consider the setting itself that much – some time, some place, whenever it is best suited. If at all. I like this scene however and all that can come from it, it holds a lot of plot potential. If it never comes to this in one way or another, no sorcerer means no flying drake and no pact with the shaman and no “transformation” (inspired by the movie Red Dragon).

The scope of the scene is only the arrival and the impact that has. The other plot elements would be derived from this scene and given their own scene in a similar fashion.

Note that this scene has no connection to the starting scene. It is not meant to be in chronological order. Actually, the more you avoid any kind of timeline in writing the scenes, the more dynamic your overall scene inventory will be. Don’t allow the scenes start to lean onto each other too much or form too predefined sequence.

Example 3: assault on the rebel camp

What	Apparent	Secret
Setting, the camp	A well disguised winter camp with a couple of dozen town folk and other nearby peasants are all busy attending to the camp.	They are more cutthroat than what they appear – a group of thugs and bandits most of them.
NPC, some of the rebels	A small group of rebels return from their raid to Pictish lands, bringing food and other loot with them.	The pict's have been able to track the group back to their camp and are preparing an assault.
NPC, Pictish warrior	Picts attack during the night. They send rolling flaming balls down the hill to the camp, adding an extra threat to their charge.	The pict's have come to revenge all the abuse they have suffered from people in the region.
PC, goal	PCs are likely taking the side of rebels against pict's, considering the rebels as their allies to reach their own goal of getting rid of the murderous merchant.	The rebels put little value on the PCs and see them expendable mercenaries.

This scene is a combat scene with some environmental threats and a lead-up. There would probably be some other fluff before this scene takes place. It is an easy scene to trigger as all it requires is the PCs to be amongst the rebels really, the location of the camp could be changed on the fly to a road or even a almost ready-to-start rebel assault on the town.

Final thoughts

I have come to value preparing scenes in a new light. Writing scenes Hollywood-style allows coming up with better material in general and everything else is subjected to serve his purpose. To reiterate, the characters are what the scenes will make them.

By always exploring the potential secret in each aspect of the scene, you will explore two sides to the story at least. It does not always have to be an alternative truth but simply what is publicly known and assumed versus what some characters in the inner circle know and are planning to do. Nothing more elaborate is required to write mystery in my opinion.

I've provided only a few examples and all of them from my current domain with some of the background information not detailed, but I hope that the simplicity of writing scenes is apparent in them. The scale of a scene if it is a single GoT Red Wedding or a potential master scene with smaller scenes derived from it does not really matter. As long as you have enough ideas to run the next session, you have enough. The method of writing scenes made you ready.