

How to Write Con Scenarios the Gar Hanrahan way

Revised Disclaimer: I wrote the essay below as a series of blog posts in... 2008? 2009?... and it's floated around the internet as a series of links or, latterly, a compiled pdf. At some point, I shall return to it, descending from Mount GUMSHOE with tablets of stone and expand it with my experience of the last decade or so. Still, most of the advice in here still holds, and several people have found it useful.

Other than updating some long-dead URLs, the text is unchanged from the original. Any complaints, comments or contrary arguments, therefore, should be addressed to the me of 2008, not present-me. Please also include stock market tips or dire warnings about the rise of facism.

Gar (2018 edition) @mytholder on twitter and elsewhere

Disclaimer: All this is my opinion, but it's based on what's worked for me over the past eight years of writing con scenarios – and since writing said con scenarios has led directly to a job in the gaming industry, I'll admit to a smidgin of ego on this topic. Contrary comments and arguments welcome.

The advice contained in this essay is focussed on writing scenarios for Irish cons, and more specifically for Warpcon and Gaelcon, because they're the big cons and the cons I know. For those unfamiliar with the Irish con scene and the scenarios used there, we operate using a system derived originally (I suspect) from the RPGA. One writer writes a scenario in advance, which is passed onto the rpg co-ordinator. A number of GMs are given the scenario, who all run it at the same time for a number of tables of players. Each game lasts three hours (including set-up and debriefing, so the actual game should take two to two and a half hours) and is usually written for six players. While much of the advice herein can be generalised to other convention setups and longer games, I'm focussing on the three hour con game.

THE PURPOSE OF WRITING CON SCENARIOS

As a scenario writer, your purpose is to give the GM all the tools he needs to entertain a group of six players for three hours. Everything in the scenario should be focussed towards that goal. Long backgrounds are only of use if the players have to read them, or if they are absolutely necessary for the GM to understand the plot.

What tools does the Games Master need?

□ Six Player Character sheets with appropriate characters, backgrounds and stats. While I'll go into more detail on PCs later, it should be noted that **the PCs are just as important as the scenario**. Indeed, if by some disaster you're forced to choose between writing the characters, and writing the scenario, you should normally go for the characters. It's better for the GM to be doing the improvisation than the players.

- A scenario, with enough plot to sustain the game for at least an hour and a half. The scenario should be readable in ten or fifteen minutes, be clearly laid out and broken down into scenes or encounters, and include a quick reference sheet for the beleaguered GM who got handed the scenario fifteen minutes after the event was supposed to start.

In that scenario should be material to entertain the players. Such material includes:

- Interesting handouts
- Interesting tactical encounters
- Interesting puzzles

- Interesting NPC
- Interesting plots
- Interesting conflicts between player characters
- Interesting ideas and descriptive details for the games master.

GETTING STARTED

So, you want to write a scenario for a convention. Cool. Go you. We need more submissions. Fresh writers, fresh ideas. It's fun, it's cool, and it's great to sit in the pub after the game and listen to players recount tales of the scenario you wrote.

However, between now and then, there's a bit of work to do.

The first step is coming up with an idea. Some ideas fit into a particular game – if you're doing to do a dungeon crawl, then some D&D variant is the obvious choice. Other ideas will arise from published games or settings. A scenario based around some quirk of Vampire politics has to be a Vampire game, a scenario set on Poseidon has to be a Blue Planet game.

Other ideas are not necessarily tied to a particular established game. You can do a heist game in any sufficiently detailed system, for example. Your clever rewrite of *Macbeth* or a parody of college politics or a simple game for hungover players on Sunday morning can fit into any system. Choose your favourite game, or ask the con's rpg co-ordinator what gaps they need to fill.

THE OUTLINE

Next, outline your scenario. As a rule of thumb, you'll have time to run at most half a dozen 'scenes' in a three-hour con slot, where each scene lasts around 20 minutes (the rest of the time will be taken up with roleplaying and indecision on the part of the players). You've got to have some sort of opening, and some sort of climax or finale, leading you with a maximum of four significant encounters or events. We'll be breaking these scenes down in more detail later, but a six-scene outline will do for now.

What's the basic plot of the scenario? Strip off all the trappings and setting-specific stuff, and determine what the players will do in the scenario. How do they get from the opening scene to the finale?

Some common basic plots, and their opening scene/encounters/finale:

Plot	Synopsis	Opening Scene	Encounters (3-5 of these)	Finale
The Mission	The players have to complete a mission.	They get assigned their mission	They have to overcome obstacles to the mission	They complete the mission
Examples	Go and slay that dragon Break into the EvilDoer Corporation and retrieve the McGuffin			

The Mystery	Something weird is going on	Weirdness engulfs the characters	They find clues and figure out what's going on	They use the clues to confront the source of weirdness
Examples	You get a letter from an old friend, who's been abducted by the Cthulhu cult. Uncover the evil conspiracy.			
Trapped by Horrors	The players are in a bad place	They discover they're trapped	They explore the bad place	They find a way out or conquer the bad place
Examples	So, you're all in this haunted hotel... So, you're in this dungeon			
You're In Charge	The players have to manage an event	They're briefed on what they have to do	They plan; unexpected problems and complications arise	The event happens
Examples	Here's a map of the bank; plan the heist My, that enemy army is getting really close. You should stop them.			
A Series of Unfortunate Events	Troubles beset the PCs	Life is peaceful, all is normal, then something disrupts it	Bad things happen.	The PCs work out what's causing the badness, and stop it.
Examples	You're a team of Superheroes, and the city's in multiple perils. The city is under siege, you're the only adventurers strong enough to save it.			
Intrigue and backstabbing	The PCs plot and conspire against each other	The stakes and arena of play are stated	Lots of conniving and backstabbing	The winner is determined
Examples	You're all diplomats representing different factions, trying to come up with a peace treaty. Welcome, Troubleshooters! Your fun mission today...			

You can combine two basic plots, of course, and not every idea will fit neatly into one of these boxes. The important things to remember are:

- A strong opening scene
- 3-5 encounters or events
- A strong finale

Do the players have meaningful decisions to make, or are they led through all the scenes in order? If they can go ‘off track’, then consider how the GM can get them back on course, or else work out an alternate route to the finale. If the players aren’t allowed go off track, then make sure that each scene leads clearly but naturally onto the next, and make sure that there’s still something meaningful for the players to accomplish. It’s ok to have a highly linear plot as long as the players have to conserve resources (hit points and spells in D&D, for example) or gather information (clues and so forth) that will play a part in determining the final outcome of the game.

THE BLURB

You’ll probably be asked to provide a blurb or a fifty-word description of your scenario for the con. These blurbs have to be in *months* before the convention, so they can be included in pre-con publicity such as the flyers or the con website. Normally, you’ll write the blurb long before you ever start in on the scenario itself. The blurb needs to:

- **Sell players on the game.** It’s got to be the Jerry Bruckheimer trailer for the movie, the gravely voice-over of epic drama. *Six heroes must save the city from an orc army!* Or *What horror lurks in the murky waters of Lake Lovecraft?* Or *Who will win the prized ‘Best Pig’ award at the Eversham Parish Fete?*
- **Give players an idea of what to expect.** Is it a hack-and-slash game, an investigative game, an emotional drama, a light-hearted romp or a deadly serious game of political intrigue? What sort of play can they expect? (We’ll talk about bait-and-switch games later, where the initial situation is replaced by something completely different during play, but be careful of bait-and-switch blurbs. If you say that the characters are exploring the Dungeon of Many Pit Traps, then the players are going to be expecting a dungeon crawl. Don’t then have the players leave the dungeon in your opening scene.
- **Tell players what they need to know.** What system is the game? Is it systemless? Over-18s? Specifically aimed at experienced players, or beginners?

There are lots of ways to make blurbs interesting. You could present them as in-character messages (from ‘*you are cordially invited to the wedding of Prince Elfears and Princess Human*’ to ‘*this is Free Trader Beowulf, we’re under attack*’.) You can directly challenge the players (‘*no party has ever survived the Dungeon of Largely Arbitrary Death*’) or hint at exciting twists (‘*You’ve been woken from your sleep by the sound of troublesome mortals. Did they really think they could steal from your hoard and get away with it?*’)

Be careful about being too obscure or specific. *Vampire* blurbs are especially notorious for saying absolutely nothing about the game (‘*This night, the kindred haunt the streets. Their bitter masquerade masks their eternal thirst for blood. As the End Times loom, whose stars will rise and whose will fall?*’). Equally bad are blurbs which drop half a dozen proper names or Capitalised Terms (‘*the Blodderites are on the march, and only the Nork of Valus can wield the power of the Holpos. Is your Vinculu equal to the threat of Zasb?*’), although these can work if you’re deliberately aiming your game at experienced players.

How to Write Con Scenarios, Part II: Characters

First, check with the con; some conventions will specify how many players they want at a table. Normally, this number is five or six. If they have such a requirement, stick to it – it’s there for a reason. (Seating arrangements, mainly, plus it’s a lot easier for the rpg co-ordinator to look at a room full of tables and go ‘*right, I need to rustle up two more players for that table, one for that one, and three for the poor guy in the corner*’ instead of ‘*agh, are there four or seven spaces in the GURPS: Combat Gardening game?*’) Let’s assume six player characters.

What goes into them?

At minimum, each player character needs to have:

- A roleplaying hook (even one as simple as ‘*arrrr , you’ re a pirate’*)
- A reason to be in the game (why is this person here? What’s his role? Why does he not walk away in the opening scene)
- Something to contribute to the game (can this character actually do anything in the game?)
- Enough stats to be usable in the system being used. (pity the poor spellcaster in the D&D game who’s not given any spells)

Ideally, the character should also have some or all of:

- A hook into the plot (‘*my cousin’s been turned into a werewolf?*’ or even better ‘*agh! I’ve been bitten by a werewolf, and I’m doomed unless I find a cure in 24 hours!*’)
- Descriptions and connection to the other player characters (again, the number of games where my character has allegedly worked with the other player characters for years, but doesn’t actually know their names yet, absolutely beggars belief)
- A full character description (keep this short, but evocative)
- A full character sheet (all necessary stats, ideally with an explanation of what they mean.)
- Copies of the necessary rules (spell writeups, equipment descriptions, etc)
- A nametag or other props

Now, all that should fit onto *two* pages, at most (not including any copies of additional rules). You want the players to be able to read and digest all this information within ten to twenty minutes, and ideally much less. Some of your players will show up early and be sitting ready to play for half an hour before the last stragglers show up, so give them something to read. Your stragglers, though, need to be able to play the character with a very quick glance through the character sheet. It’s something of a balancing act.

GROUP DYNAMICS

Player characters do not exist in a vacuum – the interrelations between the characters are vitally important. How will the player characters relate to each other? There are two aspects to consider – the functional and the interpersonal.

Functional relations are all about what the different player characters do. D&D breaks this down nicely – you’ve got the fighter, the cleric, the mage, the rogue and so on. The roles in the group are clearly defined. Other games aren’t so upfront about it, but it still boils down to Fighting Guy, Stealthy Guy, Talking Guy, Rich Guy, Computers Guy, Sniper Rifle Guy, Medic Guy, Driving Guy or whatever. Each character’s role should be clearly defined enough for another player to be able to say with confidence ‘*right, this is clearly a job for Strong guy*’.

That said, don’t overspecialise a character so much that he can’t contribute in other scenes. Just because I’m playing Fighting Guy doesn’t mean my character should have to sit there and be quiet when Talky Guy is talking. You want to give every character their own niche, but not pigeon-hole them so much that they can only do one thing and nothing else.

Don’t create characters that have nothing to do. If I’m playing Talky Guy, then I want opportunities to talk to people. Talky Guy works really well in a political game or an investigative game, but sucks in a dungeon crawl. Similarly, if I’m playing Archery Guy, then I need a chance to shoot people, or at least threaten people with a bow. Make sure players aren’t left out.

(Oh, it’s almost as bad to have one and exactly one encounter that’s specifically designed to be one player character’s chance to shine. If I’m playing an engineer with no combat skills in a *Traveller*

game, then I'm not going to enjoy a game where I spend 95% of it sitting in the corner while the combat munchkins shoot bugs, but then there's a Big 'Dramatic' scene where I've got

to make one really hard skill roll that only the engineer has a chance of succeeding to boost the engines as we escape. It's obvious, cheesy and doesn't address the underlying problem at all.)

So, what are good functional dynamics for a group? Again, D&D has it easy – you need a few fighters, a healer, a thief, a mage and so on. Faction-based games like *Vampire* or *In Nomine* or *L5r* – y'know, the 90s – also make it easy enough, as each faction has a clearly defined gimmick that's enough to hang the character's hat on. For other games, the different functional roles depend on the style of game. *Call of Cthulhu* groups might break down into Occult Guy, Doctor Guy, Fighty Guy, Police Guy, Credit Rating Guy, Forensics Guy, Academic Guy. Make sure everyone has some functional role in the group.

Different styles of play will emphasise functional over interpersonal relationships. A dungeon crawl is all about the functional relationships – it's not a huge deal that Brog the Half-Orc thinks that Effetto the Elf Mage is a wimp, as long as Brog holds the monsters off with his axe while Effetto casts *fireball*. Other games do the opposite – Effetto may be the only character who can interpret the clue that Brog found, but if Brog completely distrusts the elf, then Brog's player may choose not to pass the clue onto the elf, thus stalling the game.

Interpersonal relationships:

- Should be hooks for roleplaying. Talky Guy and Fighty Guy who just happen to be working together is much less interesting than Talky Guy and his brother, Fighty Guy, or Talky Guy who stole Fighty Guy's girlfriend six months ago
- Should keep the group together. Talky Guy trusts Fighty Guy because they're brothers.
- Should give the players who aren't directly connected to the plot a stake in the outcome. (*'You're cursed to become a werewolf? But...I'm your wife. Maybe I should help you find a cure.'*)
- Should promote conflict and debate – you want the player characters to have interesting arguments and divisions, but not so intense that the group tears itself apart in the opening scene.

HOOKS

For a convention game, you should write the plot around the player characters. Instead of being hired by the King to slay that pesky dragon, then have one of the player characters be the prince, another the captain of the royal guard, another the royal wizard... hell, send the Pope into the dungeon, why not? It's a one-shot con game, you can push the boundaries. You can give the players a much more personal stake in the outcome than normal.

Not all the characters need to have such a hook, but they should all be connected to such a hook. For example, in one Cthulhu scenario (*Black Roots*), three of the player characters were targeted by the evil cult (and were living mandrake roots, but that's another matter), while the other three were each connected to one of the first group (army buddy, wife of army buddy, brother). The opening scene dragged the first three into the plot, while the interpersonal relationships brought the rest into the game.

The aim here, by the way, is not to determine every aspect of the character for the player; it's to give him a springboard. Never state what the character *will* do, never use absolutes. 'You're a low-down, untrustworthy bastard' is good; 'you will never keep your word and always betray people' is too limiting.

(An aside: An enthusiastic player will take a scrap of paper with the word ‘fighter’ on it and turn it into a compelling and interesting character. A bad player will take your brilliant two-page write-up of compelling character background and *read it out in a monotone*).

Player characters must be the ones who are involved in solving whatever mystery or problem there is. This means that they must either be:

- The only ones who can do it (D&D adventurers, superheroes, etc)
- Employed to do it (40k Inquisitors, hired mercs)
- Personally involved in the problem (my cousin’s been abducted by aliens, and no-one else will believe me),

or

- The only ones present (we’re trapped in this isolated hotel).

Why aren’t the police/the army/the gods/the elder vampires etc handling this? Why the player characters?

SUBGROUPS

In a few games, you can assume that the whole party will move as a single (six-headed, dodecapedal) entity. Most of the time, though, you can assume that the group will split up for at least a few encounters. Having one player off on his own for too long is bad; it’s much better to have pairs of player characters who will naturally work together, giving each person someone to talk to. Try to have two or three natural partnerships in the group, making sure that no player is isolated from the rest. This is especially important if the player characters do not all know or trust each other.

SECRETS & CONFLICT

Giving a player character a secret agenda can lead to wonderful intrigue. Player characters make the best adversaries, and it’s great when the conflict is internal to the player group. However, be *very* careful when writing such secret missions into a character background. In a con game, you want to have the players working together for at least 2/3rds of the game. Ideally, conflict between players should be restricted to the finale. Up until this point, low-key bickering is fine, but outright conflict between player characters should be avoided.

One common manifestation of this is the ‘weird’ or loner character. For example, one of the player characters might be a spy for the Evil Overlord. On its own, this could work very well – the player can rely the occasional message to the bad guys, the players can wonder exactly how the bad guys are prepared for them, and so forth, and in the final battle, the evil player character can have a nice dramatic ‘mwhahaha’ moment. The trouble is when the evil character is also the untrustworthy or bizarre character. If the obvious *and* best course of action is to kill one of the other player characters from the opening scene, that’s a badly written character.

AUTHORITY

Another common issue is putting player characters in positions of authority or responsibility over others. This is problematic enough in most games, but can be absolute poison in a con game. Many players will chafe at having to obey the commands of a stranger, especially if you’ve got a wide disparity in play styles or maturity levels. Ideally, all the characters should be equal, or have a non-player character within easy reach who can resolve disputes over whose in charge. Avoid situations

where, twenty minutes into the scenario, Captain Tightpants is attempting to court-martial Sergeant Munchkin for shooting an unarmed civilian.

A variation on the authority problem is to have several player characters be agents of a corporation or government, where it's in their interest to stonewall the other player characters. This is especially common in disaster scenarios. Say you've got six player characters on board a space liner – three of them are crew of the liner, and three of them are passengers, and then the liner is attacked by pirates. The crew are going to spend the first hour of the scenario telling the other player characters to go back to their cabins and wait for the authorities to deal with the situation, don't panic, everything is under control.

If the scenario calls for the characters to have authority, make sure that this authority does not extend to dictating the 'correct' actions of other player characters. Anarchy is one of S. John Ross' Five Elements of Commercially Viable RPG Design for a *reason* (the others are Cliché, Combat, Fellowship and Enigma; as an aside, his Big List of RPG Plots at <https://rolltop-indigo.blogspot.com/2018/10/the-big-list-of-rpg-plots.html> is an absolutely wonderful resource).

RULES

Even if your game is a political drama without any combat at all, you should still provide at least some character stats. The players will try stunts you never anticipated, so give the GM at least some numbers to play with. If you're running a combat or rule-heavy game, then you *must* provide the necessary rules. I have played D&D games where the scenario writer forgot to include spells for the spellcasters and hit points for anyone else. I've played in games where there weren't any stats at all. If you're going for the arty freeform end of the spectrum, that's great – but don't call it *Call of Cthulhu* and then forget the Sanity values for the PCs. You don't need to do up a full character sheet, especially in the more complicated games (no-one ever gave a damn about encumbrance values), but you should have all the necessary information on the character sheet.

If the character has unique powers or abilities – including Merits/Flaws or Feats or Stunts or whatever – then these should not only be listed, but also explained. If you've got a D&D character with Combat Expertise and Improved Feint, then try to put a brief synopsis of the power on the character sheet. (Alternatively, give each player a rules reference document). Even if you can't describe the power in full, give the player an idea of what the power does so they'll know when it's appropriate to ask the GM about it. This is especially important if the power's name is misleading or cryptic. (For example, in one Conan game, I gave a PC the Deceitful feat, which gives a bonus to Disguise and Forgery skill rolls, but I didn't explain it. As a result, the player kept asking if he could 'use his Deceit' for bluffing, tricking foes in combat and so on.)

Special note for *In Nomine* scenario writers: Putting *Corporeal Song of Matter* or whatever on a character sheet is worse than useless. Give me at least a vague idea what the power does.

(There's a debate – and I'll be returning to it later – about the importance of rules in a con game. Certainly, keeping the action moving is much more important than getting bogged down in rules disputes, especially when you're trying to cram a whole adventure into a three-hour slot. However, that doesn't mean you shouldn't use the rules of the game system you're writing the scenario for. A lot of players use con games to try out new systems, so you should always include the most distinctive bits of the system even if you elide some rules. You can simplify the convention character sheet a little, but you shouldn't treat the rules as an optional extra.)

GRACEFUL FAILURE

Remember how I said that we'd assume six player characters? That's the ideal, but players are, well, not the most reliable. You might get six players for your game. You might get five. You might get

only two, then three more show up, then one of the first two suddenly remembers he's got to leave early half-way through the slot. You should be ready for missing players when you write up the characters.

There are several ways to minimise the impact of missing players:

- **Write one or two characters who are not directly involved in the plot.** Sir Chumly's been bitten by a werewolf, and the plot of the game is that Sir Chumly must find a cure. Great. That's the plot of the game, and it won't work without Sir Chumly. However, Sir Chumly's alcoholic brother Kevin can be dropped from the player group without significant impact if you don't have a sixth player.
- **Provide graceful exits for characters:** Some player characters can become non-player characters very easily. A cowardly thief in a D&D game can become so cowardly that he hides during a fight, and shows up only to open doors and search for traps. A Nosferatu spy can be converted into a sinister NPC information broker.

At minimum, provide a list of the PCs and note which ones can be dropped without impacting the game.

EXAMPLE: A GOOD GROUP OF PLAYER CHARACTERS

I'm going to use my own scenarios as an example of both good and bad design here. We'll start with the simple Conan romp *Sacrifices of the Well*, where a bunch of PCs are chucked into a dungeon to be sacrificed to a sea god.

The PCs are:

- **Sun and Moon**, twin Cimmerian barbarians and sellswords.
- **Athenos**, a Zingaran knight-errant and protector of...
- **Mara**, a Shemite scholar and demon-hunter
- **Jan Three-Knives**, an acrobat and thief from Aquilonia, here to steal the temple treasury
- **Corac the Reaver**, a pirate. His rival, **Red Ubar**, is in league with the priests of the well.

It's a combat-heavy scenario, so five of the six player characters are pretty good at fighting. They also all have their own style – Sun's a big bruiser, Moon's an archer, Athenos is a swordsman, Jan backstabs people, and Corac's a swashbuckler. Mara's the only character who isn't a front-line fighter, and she's got enough spells to be interesting in a fight (plus, she can make zombies, which is always fun).

The PCs are divided into three groups of two – Sun and Moon are siblings, Athenos is Mara's bodyguard, and Corac and Jan are both rogues who know each other. Everyone's got an ally, which is important as the groups don't know each other when the scenario begins.

Mara's secret mission is to kill the demon who lives in the Pit; Corac wants revenge on the pirate who betrayed him, and Jan wants to steal the treasury. The Cimmerians just want to escape, although they'll fight for gold if hired by another PC. All three groups, then, have largely parallel goals, but there's the potential for conflict at certain branch points.

Everyone has a minimalist character sheet written up that describes their basic abilities and skills; any unusual abilities are noted and explained. There's space to write down armour and weapons, as the group starts the game without any gear.

It's not the most complicated bunch of player characters, but it worked very well.

A BAD GROUP OF PLAYER CHARACTERS

These are from a *Call of Cthulhu* scenario I wrote called *Curtain of the Mind*; it was a 60s spy game where both sides in the Cold War are using Mythos sorcery.

The PCs were:

- **Kyle Wayland:** The head DOA agent on the mission, Wayland is a bit of a cold fish.
- **Nancy Grey:** One of the DOA's best sorcerers, this is Grey's first field mission. She's learned a lot of magic, but has little experience in the horrors it evokes.
- **Elijah Snow:** He was a sniper on the original team who retrieved the *Necronomicon*. Now he's part of a necromantic program – if killed, he's merely reduced to his essential salts, and can be revived using a spell.
- **Tad Delwood:** A CIA agent, Delwood's an expert at handling extractions and defections. He's made a terrible mistake on this mission, though – he's having an affair with the wife of his current assignment.
- **Akaky Davatrovitch:** A Russian archaeologist and occultist, Akaky was involved in excavating Bektrict's laboratory beneath Berlin. He's increasingly alarmed by what his work is being used for, and wants out.
- **Olga Davatrovitch:** Akaky's young wife, Olga comes of old peasant stock, and knows much about the Old Gods and why they should not be trifled with.

The DOA, by the way, was the Department of Arcana, the secret American group using Cthulhoid magic to fight the Cold War. The plot is that the three DOA agents are sent to Berlin to make contact with Akaky, who knows about this laboratory under Berlin with those damn Commies are doing evil stuff. The DOA guys go into the laboratory, find out about nastiness in Siberia, and go off there to stop it. The twist is that the DOA guy in charge is actually planning to betray them and use them to nuke Russia with Azathoth.

From a rules perspective, the characters were ok – each of them had a full character sheet, background notes, and even the characters with spells had a workable description of each 'formula.' They're all moderately interesting to read. The problems arose in play.

Firstly, Olga has absolutely nothing to do. She knows a little about the Mythos, but that's all. In play, she was ignored by everyone other than her husband Akaky and her lover Delwood, and even they just wanted to keep her safe and quiet.

Secondly, Elijah Snow is much too passive. His schtick is cool – a soldier who can be resurrected from his essential salts time and time again – but he's got no real personality to go with it.

The real problem, though, is that the DOA agents have no particular need to interact with the other three characters. As written, they go to Berlin, learn the location of the laboratory from Akaky, and then... well, logically, they say goodbye to Akaky, Olga and Delwood and head off on their little commando mission. There's no reason to keep the other three player characters in the loop at all. Delwood *might* be able to muscle his way in, but there's no real reason for the DOA agents to let Akaky and certainly not Olga go along on the rest of the mission.

Worse, the main subplot – Olga's affair with Delwood – is entirely irrelevant to the main plot, and is affects only those three sidelined player characters. This means that while the DOA agents are running around Berlin blowing stuff up, the other three are sitting in the safe house having their own little domestic dispute.

To fix this scenario, the second group of three characters need to have a much better reason to work with the first group. Akaky should have some knowledge that's vital to the mission; maybe Olga could be the only one who can guide them to the ritual site in Siberia.

SUMMARY

So, what have we learned?

- Character stats are good; full character sheets are better; specially written character sheets with explanations of unusual rules and abilities are best
- Make sure that the characters are uniquely suited to the adventure, and have a stake in the outcome
- Make sure the characters have a reason to work together, but optionally sow seeds of dissent and conflict
- Make sure that everyone can contribute to the adventure, but stay away from having one- note characters

How to Write Con Scenarios, Part III: The Opening Scene

This article isn't about running convention games, but from this point on it will be impossible for me to entirely divorce writing the game from running it. I'll keep the GM asides to a minimum.

The opening scene needs to:

- Get the players' attention
- Introduce the player characters to each other
- Start them roleplaying
- Set the tone of the whole game
- Describe the initial situation
- Tell the players what they're supposed to be doing
- Funnel the game towards the next scene

That's a lot of work for one scene, and they're all necessary to one degree or another. Let's work through them in sequence. That said, some of these can be dealt with in the player character write-ups. You can introduce the players to each other in their backgrounds ('what you know about the other characters') and give them a lot of background information about the setting.

GET THE PLAYERS' ATTENTION

Picture the scene. Your players are sitting around the table. They're chatting to each other or sitting there silently, making little towers out of dice and reading the con brochure or whatever games they just bought at the trade stands. If you've got a morning slot, they're probably hung- over or sleep-deprived or both. If you're very lucky, they're all enthusiastic about the game, but it's more likely that you've got a mix of the enthusiastic, the vaguely interested, the friends dragged along to the game, and the guys who wanted to play some other game but couldn't get tickets.

You – or rather, the GM running your game – need to drag them into the game. You have to get them excited to play. There are several ways to do this:

- **Good characters:** If the player characters are written well, and have some urgent problem they need to resolve, then this can draw the players into the game.

- **Open with a bang:** Have the opening scene be a shocking, dramatic start to the game. ‘You’re all clinging to the edge of a cliff’ works well, as does ‘you’re under attack’. Instead of meeting in a bar, you meet in a bar brawl.
- **Staggered start:** Another option is to start the game with one player character, then bring in the rest one by one. ‘You’ve all been invited to Lord Faffington’s party. PC1, you’re the first person to arrive. What do you do? Ok, a minute later, a taxi arrives with PC2...’ This lets players interact in pairs and small groups, instead of having all six PCs ‘on stage’ at the start.
- **What are you doing?** Just ask the players what they’re doing. Obviously, you’ll need something to drag the players together. This approach works well when the PCs are all part of the same organisation or crew. ‘*Right, you’re flying along through space on your free trader. Where are you and what are you doing?*’

INTRODUCE THE PLAYER CHARACTERS TO EACH OTHER

The players need to know who’s playing who, so you need some device or scene where this information can be conveyed. Most games have the classic ‘ok, let’s go around the table and introduce ourselves’ bit, which works perfectly well if you don’t have any better ideas. Options:

- **In-character introductions:** Each person introduces themselves in character. Obviously, this only works if the player characters don’t all know each other at the start of the game. (*Hi, I’m Bob the Fighter*)
- **Roll Call:** Have an NPC address each character by name, describing the character briefly. (*‘Welcome, Lord Fotherington. How’s that game reserve in Africa doing? Still the Kenyan Elephant Gun champion? Have you met Ms. Murray, voted Pluckiest Young Reporter last month?’*)
- **Dramatic moments:** Open the game in the middle of an action scene, with each player character being involved in some suitable feat of derring-do. *Right. As play begins, Sir Greatchin is battling orcs, Fr. Healbot’s next to him, and Fingers is trying to pick the lock on this treasure test’.*

However you end up doing it, just think about how the player characters are introduced, especially if the characters are supposed to know each other before hand. Having descriptions of each player character on the sheet works well, although it’s best if you reinforce it.

START THEM ROLEPLAYING

The first scene should give the players a chance to speak in character to each other. If it’s a briefing, let them ask questions. If it’s a combat scene, give them a nice big bad guy to shout insults at. Even if the adventure starts with the characters just sitting around at home, then at least throw them a bone and have something minor happen that they can react to.

SET THE TONE OF THE WHOLE GAME

If the game is supposed to be a sober investigative game, then the first scene should be low-key and well researched. Drop proper names and dates, maybe even have a map or photo of wherever the player characters are. If it’s a gritty hack-and-slash game, then the opening description should be full of gore and snapped bones. If it’s a political intrigue game, then start by describing the current politics. Players will pick up on tone if you start the game correctly. You could even do up a box text for the GM to read, but a list of points that the GM should mention works just as well.

DESCRIBE THE INITIAL SITUATION

Where is the game taking place? What’s the world like? Where are the player characters? The opening scene will set the frame of reference for the whole game. If your game involves, say, the

Fangy clan manipulating events to frame the Furry clan so they get wiped out by the Poncy clan, then your opening scene should mention the delicate balance between the Fangys, Furrys and Poncies. If the game's set in 1928, mention this so the players don't start trying to trace credit cards or hack computers. (Or, as I did in one Cthulhu game many years ago, pump a musket as if it was a shotgun.)

Your game can go beyond what's established in the opening scene, but it must evolve naturally. It's ok for the characters to start in London, investigate a mysterious death, and then move onto Transylvania in a vampire hunting game. It's not ok to start in London, have a mysterious death, and then mention half-way through that oh, yeah, this is actually a world where vampires are known and accepted members of society in this setting.

TELL THE PLAYERS WHAT THEY'RE SUPPOSED TO BE DOING

The opening scene should give the players some sort of goal or mission. This is usually, but not always, the goal of the whole scenario. Scene 1: the king says go find the magic doodad. Scenes 2-5: kill magic doodad guards, Scene 6, get doodad. You can run a bait-and-switch game where the players are sent to find the magic doodad in scene 1, only to bring it back in scene 3 and then the king turns out to be Ozgok, Corrupter of Doodads, but you still need to give the players an idea of what they're supposed to be doing in the opening scene. If there's not a clear goal for the group, you'll end up with the players running off in different directions pursuing their own ideas about what they're supposed to be doing, or else getting so caught up in inter-character roleplaying that the actual plot is neglected.

(I'm all for inter-character roleplaying; however, if you don't give the players something to do, you can end up with the situation where most of the players are more interested in preparing their mansion for the upcoming banquet than investigating the evil cult.)

FUNNEL THE GAME TOWARDS THE NEXT SCENE

There needs to be a clear ending to the opening scene, one that moves the group on to the more freeform middle of the game. You need a marker to say 'right, you're in charge now, what do you do?' This can be as blatant as the NPC briefing officer saying 'off you go chaps, good luck, watch out for the flak', or a clue leading them onto the next mystery, or even just a stairs leading down into the dungeon. However you do it, you need to give the players a little push to give the game momentum after the pre-scripted action of the opening scene.

To repeat, the goals of the opening scene are some or all of:

- Get the players' attention
- Introduce the player characters to each other
- Start them roleplaying
- Set the tone of the whole game
- Describe the initial situation
- Tell the players what they're supposed to be doing
- Funnel the game towards the next scene

SUCCESSFUL & FAILED OPENING SCENES

So, let's talk specifics. Here are some opening scenes, and notes on what they do well or fail to accomplish.

You were all assigned this mission, and now you're there...

Opening at the first action scene can make for a good dramatic opener. As long as the character sheets (or a very brief opening description from the GM) can set the mission effectively, then you can jump right into the action.

The trick is finding the right situation to open. Compare these two openings:

'The princess Arelie has been kidnapped by the evil Necromancer Foom. You, a doughty band of heroes, have arrived at the entrance to Foom's dungeon...'

vs.

'The daughter of a corporate executive has been kidnapped by the evil Foom syndicate. You, a band of cybernetic mercenaries, have arrived at the hotel where she's being held...'

In the first case, the players kick the door down and start hacking. It's a perfectly natural place to begin a D&D dungeon crawl. In the second case, the players haul the GM back by about 24 hours of game time. No-one's going to launch a rescue mission in a cyberpunk game without getting maps of the hotel, infiltrating the hotel's computer network, observing guard patterns, coming up with a backup extraction strategy and at least four plans involving gas grenades in the air ducts. Don't tell the players they walked into a situation that they would deliberately avoid.

Solution: Either consider your opening scene from the perspective of the players first, or else put in some added factor that forces their hand. If the Foom gang are going to execute the daughter in thirty minutes, then a frontal assault may be a lot more acceptable to the players.

So, the king calls you all together and says...

Welcome to Box Text Land. The GM reads out the background, the mission, a roster of player characters. Unfortunately, most GMs will do this in a monotone. The main danger here is not grabbing the player's attention, as it's a pretty dull opener if the GM can't dress it up. It's an infodump at the very start.

Solution: Try to liven this up slightly – giving the player characters some input on the mission, or having nice handouts with a map of the threatened kingdom or something.

So, you're all travelling along in *Serenity*, and you get a distress call...

Or a phone call, or a messenger, or a magic summons. The PCs are roused out of their normal lives and called to action. This has several advantages, as you can let the players determine what they're doing when the call comes, letting them describe their characters at rest before we see them in action. The downside is that the PCs can ignore the mission. Be careful of writing up characters who have no reason to actually engage with the adventure. A thuggish mercenary who only fights for pay is a fun PC, but don't expect him to run off and save the penniless village.

Solution: Write the characters so that they'll go on the mission. Players will accommodate the plot if you give them even a tiny opening; if the peasant mentions that the raiders who attacked the village looked really rich, then the merc's player will go 'ah, good booty to be had! Lead on, filthy peasant child!'

Don't confront the PCs with hopeless odds if they've got a chance to back up.

Suddenly, ninjas!

The PCs are attacked! Roll for initiative.

Well, you've just gotten the players' attention with a minor combat encounter, one with no major consequences. It shows off what the various PCs can do, it's fun, it's exciting. Huzzah. Just make sure that there's something obvious to do next after the smoke clears.

Solution: You still need to give the players a mission in some form. You *might* be able to combine it with the attack, as long as the hook is a clear one. If the player characters are attacked by ninjas who are carrying a death warrant with the name of a player character on it, then the obvious next step is try to work out why that player has been targeted for assassination.

If the player characters are attacked by orcs, and the hook is that all the orcs were wiped out a generation ago in the Big War of Orc-Killing, then *make sure the players know about the war*. Don't assume the players know anything about the setting that you haven't told them.

You all wake up in a strange place...

This is a very common setup, but it can go wrong very easily. The advantage is that the players are drawn in by the mystery, and learn about their surroundings and the other player characters at the same rate as the characters; player and character knowledge are identical. The risk is that the player characters wander off on their own instead of gelling together as a group.

Solution: Ensure that the characters can't wander off easily – just keeping them together in the first room for a few minutes is usually enough time for them to start talking to each other and working together.

So, you've just come home after the funeral of character #1's wife who died in mysterious circumstances and characters #1, #3 and #5 used to serve together in the war with character #7 but he didn't come to the funeral and there's a dead dog in the garden shed that's apparently connected to your wife's mysterious death but even though you've just had the funeral you haven't investigated that.

... which was the start of one *Cthulhu* scenario, *Dead Dogs & Black Roots*. The opening scene tried to do far too much. It's ok to break the opening into two or three scenes, assuming you're willing to take time away from the rest of the scenario.

A bad opening scene won't ruin the scenario; a good opening scene won't save it. Think of it as the launch pad for your game – if the opening scene goes badly, then the GM will have to do an awful lot more work dragging the players back to the plot and pushing up the energy level of the group. If it goes well, then the GM can just sit back and let the players drive the game.

How to Write Con Scenarios, Part IV: Core Scenes

Back in part 1, I said that as a rule of thumb, you can assume you'll have three to five scenes between opening and finale. Each of these scenes should last around half an hour each. That's actually quite a lot of play time. Depending on your game system, that's one or two fights (or a lot more, in some lighter systems); it's two or three conversations with an NPC; it's exploring a few rooms in a dungeon; it's a lot of planning and the quick execution of a plan.

I said three to five scenes – in practise, this is a minimum number. Some games have much shorter 'scenes' – a dungeon crawl needs a lot more than three to five encounters, so double the number of scenes for that. You can also have optional encounters, alternate scenes (if the PCs accept the bargain,

go to scene 4; if they refuse, run scene 5), especially long scenes and so forth. Three to five, though, is enough for most games.

Each scene should be relatively self-contained. Try to format your scenario so the GM can easily see where each scene starts and finishes.

Scenes fall into several loose categories.

- Combat Encounters: The PCs fight bad guys
- Roleplaying Encounters: The PCs talk to someone
- Challenge Encounters: The PCs have to deal with a problem
- Transitions: The PCs go from A to B in a notable fashion.
- Locations: The PCs explore somewhere
- Timed Event: Something happens at a particular time, whether the PCs are there or not
- Triggered Event: Something happens in response to something the PCs do
- Scripted Scene: NPCs do a lot of stuff, the PCs respond

Obviously, these types of scenes aren't exclusive – you can have the PCs go to a location, meet someone there, roleplay a bit, and then beat up some foes all in the same scene. I've divided them this way because these are the ways that they start. A location scene happens when the PCs go there, a combat scene happens when they meet the bad guys and so forth. Most scenarios contain multiple types of scenes, by the way. Take a cop game where the PCs are investigating a murder. Most scenes are triggered by the actions of the characters – they go to the murder scene, they talk to the witness and so forth – but a car chase is a challenge scene, and the bit where the corrupt Lieutenant calls the PCs off the case is triggered when they get too close to the truth.

COMBAT ENCOUNTERS

A wise man once said to me, 'you can do whatever you want when you're GMing a game, as long as you let the players kill something once a session.' The great thing about combat is that it's hard to get wrong – a scenario that's just five fights in a row can actually be enjoyable, as long as all the PCs have something to do in a fight and you've got a good set of combat rules.

Con scenarios pose an interesting dilemma when it comes to combat – if someone's dedicated three hours of their time and a few quid to your game, is it ok to kill their character? In practise, the answer is 'not until scene 5.' You should challenge the PCs in a fight, but the characters should not be in actual danger of dying until at least two-thirds of the game session has elapsed. (Exceptions can of course be made for really, really annoying or stupid players.)

Keep the combat rules simple; keep the combat interesting. You can't assume a high degree of rules knowledge on the part of the players. Some people's eyes glaze over when you say 'attack of opportunity'. Combats should never rely on the players knowing the rules, but should assume a modicum of common sense. A dramatic place to have a fight – a rope bridge over a chasm, a belltower, a market full of scared peasants and livestock, a corporate office full of cubicles and meeting rooms – will serve you better than rules cleverness.

Make both the player characters and their enemies interesting in a fight. Battles which devolve into dicerolling aren't fun for everyone. Give characters gimmicks, even if these gimmicks aren't necessarily the best tactical option in a fight. Errol Flynn swinging from the chandelier is more fun to play than Meatshield the Warrior, even if Meatshield is a tactically better choice.

Make sure everyone has at least some way of participating in combat. This doesn't mean that every character needs to be a killing machine, but the kindly old professor should at least be able to whack people with his umbrella and contribute something. Alternatively, you can have combat situations

where only one or two PCs can participate, but ensure there's some other equally vital role for the other characters to perform at the same time. 'Mecha Pilot Rodin and Mecha Pilot Jimbo go and hold off the bad guys, while we get the McGuffin from the alien spaceship' works. 'Mecha Pilot Rodin and Mecha Pilot Jimbo fight while we sit here for ten minutes and watch' can

also work. 'Mecha Pilot Rodin and Mecha Pilot Jimbo play for an hour while we sit here bored' must be avoided.

Don't make the bad guys pushovers. If you're going to have a fight, then it may as well last a few rounds. This is especially prevalent in gritty or high-tech settings, where a hit often means a kill. Don't have the bad guy and his goons show up in a situation where one grenade takes them all out. Give the foes enough hit points/cover/other protection to survive two or three attacks from even the most dangerous player character attack. If you're going to break out the combat system, make it count.

If your scenario is going to feature a lot of combat, then it's a good idea to have a simple early fight against weak foes so the players can learn how the combat rules work, how their characters work and how the group fights together.

Be aware of the effects of damage in your system. Yes, a D&D cleric can patch up a mortally wounded warrior with a few spells, but he may need to rest afterwards. Will it break your scenario if the group pauses for twelve hours? In Traveller, one good hit can put a PC in hospital for weeks – is there a convenient high-tech medical facility with fast-healing drugs available to the PCs?

ROLEPLAYING ENCOUNTERS

For most roleplaying encounters, it is enough to give the GM a brief description of the NPC's goals and personality quirks, and maybe a few sample lines of dialogue or responses to likely questions from the PCs. Something like:

“Assistant Director Halsey is the PCs' direct superior in the FBI. He's a harried bureaucrat, suffering from stress ulcers and premature baldness. He just wants the case closed, and isn't particularly interested in tales of UFOs and paranormal phenomenon. Just get him an answer that he can write up in a report and he's happy. He's here to give the player characters their assignment, and to caution them against blaming everything on aliens.

Halsey tells the characters that four children have vanished from Williams High School in the last week, and that local police are baffled...

Q: Where were the kids last seen?

A: At the school. Two vanished between classes; another walked into the shower in the locker room and didn't come back. The last one went to the guidance counselor, and vanished while the counselor's back was turned...'

There's enough there for the GM to play the NPC. Optionally, you could mention an actor as a visual reference ('he's like Taub from *House*'), or give a few mannerisms or catchphrases ('he winces visibly when the PCs mention the supernatural'), but don't go overboard. Three or four lines of description is probably overkill. As long as there's a quick sketch of the character, and notes on what goals he has and what information he can impart to the PCs, that's enough.

One common mistake is to include too many NPCs in a roleplaying encounter. Assistant Director Halsey is fine on his own, but don't put him in a conference with the PCs and three other NPCs. It's hard to play more than one NPC at once.

You can have multiple NPCs present, as long as the players can talk to them in sequence, not at the same time. So, if Duke Fotherington and Mayor West are both at the ball, then the PCs can meet the mayor first, then the duke, or split up so you run the conversation with one NPC first, then the other – anything, so long as the GM is only playing one character at a time.

If you absolutely have to have multiple NPCs in a scene, then:

- Make sure there's a strong contrast in speech patterns and demeanour
- Have one NPC do most of the talking
- Involve the player characters as much as possible. Have the NPCs ask questions of them, demand their participation, appeal to them for support – anything to avoid the absolute death that is two NPCs having a conversation or an argument in front of six bored players.

Any roleplaying scene has to have sufficient content to last several minutes. Give the player characters something to react to or argue over. Yes, the players may come up with their own cool things to roleplay about, but you can't rely on the players' own creativity to carry the whole scene.

For example, I recall one Vampire con scenario which started off something like this:

Scene 1: The PCs are invited to a party

Fair enough. It'll do as an intro.

Scene 2: At the party, the assembled vampires ask the PCs what they think of the prince and the party.

And here the game runs aground. Only one or two of the PCs had any listed opinions on the prince, there was no real description of the party, and the 'assembled vampires' were a faceless crowd without any personalities or even individual names. The result was thirty minutes of painfully stilted play.

GM: So, kindred, what do you think of the party?

PC: Er...it's great.

GM: And... the prince.

PC: I dunno. Also great. It is so generous of him to invite us to this elegant soiree. GM: Yes...generous.

PC: You said that very cryptically.

GM: Did I?

PC: I talk to someone else.

GM: He also asks what you think of the party. PC: I leave.

GM: You can't.

At the same time, you don't need to spoonfeed everything to the players. Just give the GM some ideas, and ensure that the players have enough information on their situation to make stuff up. Let's tweak the Vampire party to make it a little easier to run.

Scene 2: The PCs arrive at the party. It's being held in a private ballroom in the biggest hotel in the city, and feels like a Mafia wedding. Lots of men in suits, women in expensive dresses, red

wine and concealed weapons. The servants are all mortals or ghouls; there are around fifty vampires here. Some of the vampires have brought mortals with them, so you're supposed to keep to the Masquerade here.

(To be honest, most players would have assumed most of that description anyway – it's Vampire, and it's a formal party, so it's going to be in a swanky hotel or private mansion. Adding the fact that mortals are present pushes the players to be a little more circumspect about what they say. It's just a little detail, but it's an evocative one.)

Among the guests are:

- *Lady Jasmine: A femme fatale who flirts with any male characters. She considers the party dull and wants to liven things up – do the PCs agree?*
- *Roark: A young vampire. He's got a mortal woman, Cecily, on his arm. She's obviously bedazzled by the glamour of the party, and is oblivious to the fact that Roark's going to kill her before the night is over. Roark will play on this, letting the player characters in on the joke of her impending demise.*
- *Hamilton: A stuffy elder vampire and a close ally of the prince. He considers the PCs to be beneath him, and will sneer at them.*

That's enough to give the GM something to work with. None of the three NPCs has any purpose in the scenario other than to serve as a roleplaying foil for a few minutes, so you don't need to provide any stats or other background. (well, you might for Roark, if any of the player characters decide to save clueless Cecily).

Note that you only need to go to this much trouble if you specifically plan for a lengthy roleplaying scene as part of your outline. For other, incidental NPCs, you don't need to provide as much detail. For example, in a fantasy game, you might have a scene where the PCs arrive at the king's castle and are challenged by the guards. If you want a roleplaying scene where the PCs have to argue their way past the guards, then you'll need to give the guards some personality and specify *why* the PCs aren't allowed in. If being barred from the king's castle is just a passing aside, then you can just say something like 'the guards will grumble, but will let the PCs in if they present a good argument for seeing the king.'

Roleplaying encounters are heavily reliant on the skill of the GM to run, but that doesn't mean the writer can just say '*the PCs roleplay for an hour with the NPCs*' and leave it at that. You must provide just as much support for roleplaying encounters as any other scene.

CHALLENGE ENCOUNTERS

Challenges are problems the players need to overcome through some means other than hitting and talking. The problem can be a clear obstacle ('how do we get into the castle?') or a question to be resolved ('so, we've just discovered that Bob's the traitor; let's come up with a plan to capture him').

The challenge should be big enough to take up a whole scene's worth of play. 'How do we get into the castle?' is a nice big challenge – the players can plan how they'll set a fire to distract the guards, then scale the walls and hide in the stables on the far side, or sneak in on market day disguised as monks or whatever. The planning and execution of such a scheme will take half an hour of play.

By contrast, 'how do we get past this door?' probably isn't a valid Challenge for a whole scene. It's a single Lockpicking roll.

An aside: some scenarios have scenes that 'spotlight' one of the player characters, by giving that player a chance to do something that *only* that character can do. If there's a thief player character, then

there's a scene where the thief get a chance to show off his sneaking skills by stealing a vital plot item. If there's an Egyptian history professor, then there's a scene where the professor must translate the hieroglyphics to find the lost tomb. These scenes are a handy way to include a potentially marginalised character in the plot, but there are two caveats. Firstly, make sure these scenes don't last more than a few minutes. It's boring for the rest of the group to sit there for half an hour while the thief solos the dungeon, or the netrunner hacks the network or whatever. Secondly, make sure that your plot is robust enough to work if the player character is missing or otherwise unable to act.

A good challenge involves more than dice rolling; it should force the players to discuss options, either in or out of character, and make tough decisions.

TRANSITIONS

Some scenarios describe the PCs travelling from one location to another. It's fine to include transitions like this, especially if they're being brought to an important or secret location, or travelling in an unusual manner. 'The PCs travel by jeep to the little village of Hosterfield, and are escorted by armed guards disguised as farmhands into the barn. There, a lift brings them down to the hidden submarine base...'

Players don't really do much except react to transition scenes, so they should be kept short. They're good for setting the mood or as a cooldown after a big fight.

LOCATIONS

In a location scene, the players explore a particular area. The size of the location varies depending on the game. The classic location scene is the dungeon, of course, but you could have the characters exploring a whole planet in a sci-fi game, or a single room such as a murder scene in an investigative game. The common element is that the players have decisions about the route they take through the location, and that they get to stop and examine important elements of the location.

If spatial relations are important, then provide a map.

If there are secrets or traps to be discovered, then highlight these in the text.

The chief danger in a location scene is making the location so large that it takes a long time for the players to explore. As soon as maps and rooms become important, the players become paranoid and cautious. Assume about ten minutes per room or important item in a room.

TIMED EVENT

Timed events happen when a certain amount of time has elapsed. You can use in-game or out-of-game time for this. Both have their advantages.

Events based on in-game time feel less artificial. The enemy is going to attack at dawn, so the attack happens after the PCs all go to sleep for the night. The bomb's set to go off an hour into the flight. The king comes home from hunting at twilight. The game feels like a living world, as events occur beyond the player characters.

The mistake I've seen made time and time again is failing to correctly estimate how long in-game events will take. The most common mistake is to have events separated by hours or days of in-game time. One scenario had the first timed event happening at noon on the first day, and the second event taking place on the evening of the second day. The problem there is that players are rarely willing to let time pass without doing something. There was nothing for them to discover in the scenario until

the second event happened – the plot didn't kick in until then. If the players had been willing to let go and skip on by 24 hours, then the game could have continued, but instead they kept running around this little rural village, interrogating everyone and chasing after every non-existent hint and rumour. By the time they were finally willing to allow time to move on, there wasn't enough out-of-game time left to finish the whole plot.

A good GM can push the group on, but you should still avoid excessively long gaps. All the action in your scenario should fit into 24-36 hours of play in most cases. The longer the gaps between scenes, the greater the chance that the players will wander off or stall. If the ritual to summon Cthulhu happens at midnight, then the players should learn of this in the nick of time or just too late, not ten hours in advance (not unless you want the cultists to wander into a minefield).

Using out-of-game time is a trick that really works on in a con game. You've got to finish your game within a three-hour time slot, so you can use this to your advantage. Having an event that happens, say, two hours into the game can set up the finale. This works best in games where a race against time is part of the plot. The triggered event should be one that can happen at any time in-game.

TRIGGERED EVENT

Use triggered events to respond to the actions of the players. For example, when the characters kill the henchman of a bad guy, then the bad guy might respond by attacking some ally of the player characters. Like timed events, triggered events make the game world seem more real to the players, and makes your plot less static. They're especially good in games that would otherwise seem very predictable.

Make sure you don't make any unwarranted assumptions about the situation when the triggered event happens. For example, if there's a triggered event in your game that states '*when the PCs find the alien artefact, the FBI show up at the crash site and arrest everyone*', be careful of

assuming that all the player characters are present when that happens. Some of them might be there; some of them might be off investigating something else, or trying to buy shotguns. Will your plot still work if the FBI don't arrest all the characters? How hard will it be for the GM to adapt the scene to unexpected circumstances?

SCRIPTED SCENES

Finally, scripted scenes involve a lot of pre-scripted actions from the NPCs. The scene where the evil villain monologues to the captured player characters and launches missiles towards all the world capitals, the dragon smashing its way into the castle to devour the king, the cult ritual that summons the Great Old One – that's all scripted stuff. If the most important thing in the scene is the action of an NPC, then it's scripted.

Keep scripted scenes to a minimum. They may be necessary to move the plot along at times, but they're still a crutch for a lazy writer. The whole point of a roleplaying game is to be interactive – scripted scenes force the players into a largely passive role.

Above all, don't let the scene's resolution hinge on the action of an NPC. The PCs must always be the ones to determine the ultimate outcome of a scene. This may be done in concert with an NPC – for example, in a court case, you could have an NPC judge listening to the testimony of the PCs, or have the PCs pass judgement on the pleas of an NPC, but you should never cut the PCs out of the action.

BUILDING ON YOUR OUTLINE

This taxonomy of scenes is a little artificial – I don't think I've ever consciously sat down and gone 'combat scene...combat scene...roleplaying...triggered...combat...' – but by calling attention to the mechanics of each scene type and its length, the above list should help you when you're turning your planned outline into a scenario. Break down each major event or encounter into one or more of the scene types, and see if you've got your three to five major scenes that make up the spine of your game. You can have smaller scenes and spotlight scenes and optional encounters and so forth too, but if you haven't got three to five clearly defined major encounters, then there's a problem with your outline.

How to Write Con Scenarios, Part V: The Finale

The final scene is, obviously, the climax of the scenario, the denouement of the plot, the big epic fight with the villain. It's also the hardest scene to plan. You'll find that unless you keep a very tight grip on the possible actions of the player characters, the final scene ends up being an awful lot of if... thens and maybes.

Let's say there are three scenes leading up to the finale, and the player characters can do A or B in each of these scenes. That means that there are $2 \times 2 \times 2 = 8$ possible 'states' the group can be in as they enter the final scene. Did they pick up the magic sword, or leave it behind? Did the guards alert the evil wizard that the PCs are coming? Did they solve the riddle that gives them a clue on how to defeat the wizard's spells? And that's not including all the creative ways players can screw up – there's every chance that one or more PCs are missing, dead, out of spells or have decided that actually, the evil wizard's a nice guy and they should help him instead of thwarting him.

By the time the players reach the finale of your adventure, then, your control of the game as a writer is much more limited. Your task here is to help the GM to bring the game to a satisfying conclusion, not dictate events.

The finale needs to:

- Draw the players to the finale
- Give the players enough information to act
- Pose a challenge or question for the players to resolve
- Provide a dramatic conclusion to the whole plot
- Give scope to resolve player subplots

DRAW THE PLAYERS TO THE FINALE

A con game has to fit into a three-hour slot, so you have to be able to jump to the final scene quickly if the players are being too slow. Either have optional encounters that can be dropped, so the GM can rush onto the finale, or else allow the GM to start the finale at any time. For example, a game where the players are racing to stop the invasion of a city could have the invading army

showing up as the final scene. Another option is to have some way of informing the characters where they should go. (Non-specific psychic powers are a GM's best friend.)

GIVE THE PLAYERS ENOUGH INFORMATION TO ACT

The finale should give the players a brief recap of the adventure thus far, restating what's going on and why. This can be anything from the supervillain giving the classing 'Before I Kill You, Mr. Bond' monologue to a bit of boxed text, but it can also be more subtle. Just bringing in elements from previous scenes can be enough to remind the players of past events and plot elements.

The players may need to understand what's at stake in the finale, if it's not immediately obvious. They need to be able to make a meaningful, informed decision. This doesn't mean they need to know everything, but there should be enough clues in the finale alone to tell them what the basic situation is.

For example, in one *Legend of the Five Rings* scenario, the final scene revolves around a young samurai and the players deciding whether or not he should commit seppuku. There's lots of plot and background which the players may or may not discover over the course of the game, but for that final scene to work, the players only need to know:

- The samurai shamed his family, and can only atone by dying
- After his shameful act, he fled into the forest and became a heroic outlaw fighting against an evil lord.

POSE A CHALLENGE OR QUESTION FOR THE PLAYERS TO RESOLVE

This can be anything from 'a big fight scene' to 'the players decide whether or not to press the big red button'. Whatever this final challenge is, the players *must* have agency in its resolution. It should be up to them what finally happens in the scenario, not non-player characters or the whim of the GM.

This doesn't mean that the whole plot has to turn on the decisions of the characters, but their ultimate fates should be influenced by their decisions. Consider an *Aliens*-style sci-fi game; the finale is a desperate escape from the planet as the subterranean monsters overrun the colony. The player characters may not be able to stop the aliens, but the final fate of the characters should be in their hands. Maybe they escape, maybe they don't. Maybe some characters heroically hold off the horde to let the rest escape. Whatever the final confrontation is, the players have spent three hours of play to get this far – make sure their actions mean something.

Don't feel obliged to provide a clear 'right' answer to the challenge. Definitely avoid writing games where a single, rather unintuitive action is the only way to succeed. For example, one scenario has the players confronting the ghost of a murdered woman. The scenario states that the only way to defeat the ghost is to get her to focus her attention on the murder weapon, so that her hatred of her killer consumes her. The problem with this overly specific ending is that the players can come up with loads of equally compelling variations on putting the ghost to rest. As written, the scenario is the roleplaying equivalent of an obstinate text adventure, and the players are reduced to shouting ideas until they hit upon the one that works. A good scenario should be flexible; let the GM run with whatever good plan the characters come up with.

(Two caveats. Firstly, this doesn't mean scenarios should have a wishy-washy 'anything the players come up with works' ending. It just means that you shouldn't script the ending so tightly that there's no wiggle room. Secondly, it's ok to have a tightly scripted, inflexible ending if the whole point of the scenario is to uncover that ending. Dread Cthulhu can only be banished if the players find all the clues leading to the correct version of the Ritual of Buggeroff, so the only way to succeed is to find and enact that ritual. In this case, the final confrontation is putting all the clues together to perform the ritual before Cthulhu eats them.)

PROVIDE A DRAMATIC CONCLUSION TO THE WHOLE PLOT

The finale is where you throw everything at the players. Everything's coming to an end, so you don't need to worry about consequences. Set the world on fire. Often, you'll find yourself returning to the situation in the opening scene. The characters come full circle, returning to where they started, only now everything has changed.

Read back over the opening scene, where you stated the initial situation and gave the player characters their task. Read back over the other significant scenes and encounters. Have all the plots raised in those scenes come to a head? Is everything important brought together in the finale?

Make the finale as memorable as possible. It should be as intense and dramatic as any of the preceding scenes, if not more so.

GIVE SCOPE TO RESOLVE PLAYER SUBPLOTS

While you're off blowing up the planet in the main plot, don't forget all those juicy player subplots you set up when you wrote the characters. If Bob is secretly in love with Alice, then try to include some element in the finale that will encourage Bob to confess his true feelings. Something like 'if we marry Alice off to the King of the Moon People, that'll stop the Moon War' works perfectly well. If one character's whole gimmick is that they're out to make money, then there should be some opportunity for the character to profit in the finale; if money plays no part in the finale, then that character may be left with nothing to do.

You don't need to integrate the player subplots into the main plot, but you should keep them in mind. Don't forget to give players a chance to resolve whatever they've been doing for the whole game – if one character's main plot is that he wants to be court wizard, and has spent the last three hours talking about his ambition to be the new Court Wizard, then address this either in the final confrontation or else in an epilogue.