

Role-Playing Recipes:

When In Doubt, Add A Dash Of MacGuffin!

By Jim Zubkavich

There's times when a game session just seems to stall. No matter what kind of game you've pulled together, the players can get side tracked or the plot just seems to unravel in the wrong direction. When all hope seems lost and your players have nothing to strive for, there's one solution that can hit the spot: the might of a MacGuffin!

MacGuffin? Is it a rare bird or strange treasure? No... well, technically it could be... but let's not get ahead of ourselves here.

MacGuffin is a term coined by Alfred Hitchcock to describe something elusive in all senses of the word. It's the object of a quest, a driving force or mystery that brings trouble to our heroes' doorstep or a reason to keep them searching. It can be anything really: a secret, a fabulous treasure, a sealed briefcase, a map or even a bird. The point isn't so much the MacGuffin itself, as it is the motivation behind it: protect it, destroy it or find out what it is. A MacGuffin is a way for you to keep your group on task and give them a discernable goal that they can accomplish.

If your game has lost purpose, a quick MacGuffin injected into the story may be the energy or focus you need to get things back on track. If you're in mid game and need a fast solution, you can add a touch of MacGuffin immediately and worry about how it fits into your story later on!

For my own gaming sessions, I tend to lay little "MacGuffin possibilities" throughout my adventures. This way, I can always have a small item or piece that the party has had for some time which can tie into later stories. One of the coins the group picked up may be the prison for a powerful spirit, a piece of parchment may have coded words, some music the group has heard may be part of a deadly ritual. These are little unique things for them to explore or bits and pieces I can evolve into an adventure hook later on. The more that they have, the more options I have to spring something on them when the game seems to be slowing down too much.

Think of compelling movies or novels that have a MacGuffin at their core. The Lord of the Rings easily comes to mind; the One Ring is the focus of all the characters' efforts and its destruction is the catalyst for almost every event that we read about in the trilogy. In Pulp Fiction, the MacGuffin is the mysterious glowing briefcase that is being sought out by Marcellus and the other characters. In The Matrix, it is the search for an elusive savior called 'The One'. One ring, one briefcase, one person; all of them are focal points for the journey.

In any genre or setting, a simple item or piece of knowledge can drive the story onwards and give your characters a clear purpose. Whether it's an item that the group has in their possession or something that they desperately want or need, it's an easy way to jumpstart an adventure. If you're worried about the group not searching out the MacGuffin, have them receive it by accident or pick it up as something seemingly harmless. When other people come looking for the MacGuffin, your group has something to take care of, whether they were anticipating it or not!

If you can, avoid a simple pick up and drop off scenario. Create a challenge in terms of opposition, distance or a unique set of circumstances needed to resolve

the MacGuffin. If you're good at running things on the fly, you can even let the players go their own route and weave a solution into their journeys. Once the story starts moving at a faster pace, make sure that they understand how important the MacGuffin is so that they'll stick by and see it through to the end, even if it's just to find out what it actually is!

To mix things up, try to avoid cliché MacGuffins where you can. A magic gem or a mysterious map is pretty typical, especially in a fantasy setting. Go for the odd or unique where possible and your gaming group will be even more intrigued. A possessed pigeon, a magically trapped sound or an engraved belt buckle... these are the kind of bizarre MacGuffins that can help to build storylines that your players will talk about for years to come.

The d20 system is perfect in many ways for this because of the wealth of material at your fingertips. Any d20 book can be a wealth of MacGuffin ideas that can be adapted to your campaign, no matter what time period or genre you're using. Find something in a magazine or an adventure that your players have probably never read and you can introduce it into the game and keep it a secret. If your players are voracious d20 researchers, combine a few items together or create something entirely from scratch. The mystery and unknown can add a lot to the adventure, as the group discovers exactly what they have or are searching for.

There's times that a party can feel like they never really succeed at anything. The group can do a lot of things, but there is always more hordes of creatures to fight or places for them to go with no victory in sight. If your group resolves a MacGuffin that you've laid out for them, be sure to give them the satisfaction of finishing it, even if it's just something small. It's the bonus of a job well done or an interesting puzzle solved and a smaller chapter of the larger campaign story wrapped up. These little rewards also make them more susceptible the next time you spring the mighty MacGuffin on them.

So, when you feel your group of players losing momentum, add a dash of MacGuffin to your gaming repertoire. The next thing they pick up or bit of information they learn might be nothing out of the ordinary, or it could be the catalyst that catapults them into a whole new set of adventures.