

## One-on-One RPGing: Interactive Storytelling Part Two: Campaign Brainstorming

by Jim Zubkavich

In the first article about one-on-one gaming, I discussed the basic concept of one player, one Game Master gaming and the advantages that it can offer to role-players that are used to the group mentality. In this article, I'll be talking about the initial brainstorming process and how you can make your player the key to your campaign world.

It may be obvious, but it's still important to state this up front: In solo gaming situations, the character is the complete focus of the adventures to come. Their actions will shape the story in a far more immediate way than those of a group of 4 to 6 player characters. The focus isn't split amongst other PCs and we want to make sure that we use that to our advantage.

As a Game Master, it's easy to dream up epic storylines or incredibly cool NPCs that our heroes can interact with. But with a solo game situation, a GM has to reign in those tendencies and make sure that the player is a big part of that initial brainstorming process. If you only have one person that you're trying to entertain, you'd best make sure that they help build a story that will engross them.

Sit down with the player and lay down the basics: what gaming system you're going to use and what genres you're interested in running. Then, give them a chance to throw concepts at you while fighting the urge to overload them with your own ideas and expectations. A lot of players aren't used to having such free reign to help build a game from the ground up and this is the perfect time to see what types of characters or situations they look forward to trying. Pay close attention and you'll start to see the building blocks you can lay a campaign foundation upon.

In the Under The Eclipse campaign, I sat down with my player and told her I wanted to start a D20 Modern campaign. She began to toss ideas around and eventually came up with a sneak thief who dabbles in magic as a concept that she was excited to play. I doubt I would have come up with the idea on my own, but the wheels started turning and I realized that I could use it as a skeleton frame to start the campaign with.

Ask questions and get a feel for this character's attitude and situation. Do all of this before you roll the dice or start writing down stats. This character has to be interesting enough to hang the entire campaign off of, so you have to be sure that it has room to evolve and a story worth telling. Don't be specific about events that could happen down the road, you don't want to ruin any surprises. Ask the player about what kind of character they'd like to see grow or their long term goals and then start planning adventures that could make it possible with some effort.

If this seems alien to the "run a series of modules" or "plan a campaign world" mentality that you're used to: good. We're not trying to emulate a team-based game. Like some of the best fiction or movies, we need an interesting singular personality and a direction, not a vast world with dungeons for them to delve in to at random.

After some general questions, the D20 Modern campaign started to form around our protagonist. Karina Gagliana (Karen Frost to her friends) is a half-Italian

break and enter specialist in her twenties who is trying to reconnect with her mob roots and eventually work her way into a comfortable position, breaking the law when it suits her.

Once you have these concepts in place and you feel that you may have enough elements to start a campaign with, it's time to go through with normal character creation. You'll probably find that the stats are far more meaningful with this method and that the character is more developed than a typical starting hero. While the player is working on getting the stats finished, you've got other work to do: brainstorming the people our protagonist is about to meet.

Ideally, a support network of NPCs will start to gather around your main character. The people that character will interact with, the people they trust and the first few ones they will come into conflict with. These are the tools that you can use to build a lean and mean solo campaign around. Don't worry about the big bad guys or the epic events. Start small and make the things you create relevant to the beginning of the story.

Karen's a thief, so she's going to need a fence to sell her stolen goods to. She needs mob contacts, people who are related to her or who remember her Italian father. From this basis springs forth Buzzard, a middle-aged gothic guy who runs a pawn shop called "Pawns, Rooks and Drag Queens" as well as several members of the Vercoletti mob family. This gives me NPCs that she can interact with and sources of information that I can use as a GM to subtly influence the plot.

Giving your player more influence on the start of a campaign serves two important purposes: it immediately engages them, ensuring that they are an important part of the story. It also saves you the work of guessing what kind of game will make them happy. Taking their initial concept, you can slowly introduce your own story ideas and creativity, while weaving in elements that work with their sensibilities.

Bounce ideas back and forth. Make suggestions on places or possible contacts or history for the character concept. The building of this core character should be a bit of give and take. If your player makes outrageous demands or wants something rare, you may even want to bend the rules a bit and let them go with it. In a normal group game this could spin out of control, but remember that this one character is the focus, they can be extraordinary. Use their unique situation or concept as a springboard for the adventure. Even if they're more powerful than a standard starting character, you can always beef up the opposition. Most opponents are built to take on a group of 4 to 6; you won't have to worry about finding worthy threats.

With these initial elements in place, you're ready to start laying down the road ahead. If your campaign seems to lose direction later on, remember to look back at these initial ideas. These are the pieces that will influence everything later on and this is the character that will drive the story forward.

In the next column, I'll talk about running your first session and creating NPCs on the fly. In the meantime, talk to your player and spark some creative ideas.