

One-on-One RPGing: Interactive Storytelling Part Five: Story Beats and Revelations

by Jim Zubkavich

This is the fifth article in a series dedicated to one-on-one gaming (one Game Master and one player). In previous articles, I discussed the solo gaming experience, creating a campaign, the importance of the first session and solo-based combat situations. In this article, I'll discuss tying story threads together, using mysteries and making milestones in your solo campaign.

After the first few sessions of play, you need to start planning for the future. You should create point form notes on events and NPCs that have been introduced and what ties they may have with each other or ways they could evolve. These shouldn't necessarily be obvious and the surprising links can be revealed as the campaign progresses. Add more NPCs, past events, items or places to draw the web in tighter. All of these things can be brought into play bit by bit and make the campaign story more dynamic. Create a flexible "road map" of sessions, with potential cliffhanging moments or surprises. It can be tempting to plan out every last little piece of this puzzle, but you must resist that urge and leave yourself some gaps to be evolved as your hero makes his choices.

Once this story map is made, you can play towards milestone events. Milestones are story arcs within the larger campaign, goals that have a start, middle and end. They can connect to the big plot, in an obvious or subtle way, and give the player a distinct victory or failure to work with and grow from.

For example: If our hero discovers through contacts or spying that a secret evil ceremony is being held at a remote location, it gives him something to plan for; a milestone event you can use to ratchet up the tension.

This ceremony is a timed event, something that he'll want to interact with in some way. It's a deadline that he can't change. But, whether he heads down with weapons blazing to destroy it or in disguise to infiltrate it will change the situation drastically. You don't want to railroad him towards one option or another. You've laid out the mission now let him figure out his game plan. Brainstorm what the consequences may be in several cases, but don't be afraid to fly by the seat of your pants if needed; players rarely do exactly what you think they will. When it comes time to play out the ceremony, there's a fun energy and spontaneity for both of you because your plans aren't limited by one or two outcomes. It's more than a typical dungeon crawl and your player knows that sink or swim, he made the choices and will have to live with the results in game.

After running one of these milestone events, make sure that it counts. Victories or setbacks have got to be worth something or the excitement of the game will quickly fizzle. Your player needs to know that he is making a difference in the story and that the decisions he makes will impact the world around him appropriately. If he plans well, role-plays well and rolls the ol' d20 well too, there's no reason why a good plan shouldn't go through cleanly. Luck and strategy should be rewarded, just as stupidity and bad luck should turn the screws tighter. It gives the game real consequence and lets the player know that you're playing "fair" (within dramatic reason, of course).

As you run the solo game, it's important to keep the main character's current goals simple and do-able while hinting at bigger things to come. While juggling all of this, try not to over complicate the story with too many elements. It may

seem simple for you to see the connections, but your player will be discovering it from a very different perspective. Milestones give you a strong way to introduce tasks, but also allow maximum flexibility to branch off in a different direction based on their outcome. You can even have a few different story arcs happening simultaneously and have them change based on what order they are completed.

As the story evolves, it's important that your NPCs do too. One of the best parts of running a one-on-one role-playing game is the amount of flexibility you can have with character relationships. Unlike a group-based game, loyalties can be far more mutable. Allegiances can change drastically because everyone other than the main character is an NPC. There are no obvious allies wandering around with the words "PC" stamped on their forehead sitting across the table. Use this to your advantage. Introduce mercenaries and kind-hearted souls alike, but always leave room for doubt in the character's mind as to where their true loyalties could lie.

With so many gray areas, be sure to have some trustworthy people that the hero can turn to, even if they're not obvious. Keep outright betrayal to a minimum, but keep your player guessing. You want the main character to be cautious, not slaying every NPC he meets because he assumes that they'll be the next one to backstab him.

NPCs can become memorable staples of your campaign world. With that said, there are pitfalls that can emerge. Make sure your NPCs are never more important to the story than the main character. As cool as Han Solo is, the original Star Wars movies are really about Luke Skywalker and his growth, don't forget that. Whether the NPC is a friend or foe, never make them invulnerable or infallible. They get hurt, they can be selfish, they make mistakes and they can be killed. Consequences should reverberate through them just as strongly as they do through the protagonist, maybe even more so.

The further along your solo campaign goes, the more story threads and NPCs you'll have to tie it all together. Introduce new information carefully and make sure that the protagonist earns it at each step. The more that he sees of the big picture, the closer he'll be getting to the end of the story. Try to use different locations or goals to vary the situations he finds himself in. Without a team to play off of, there's more pressure on you as the Game Master to keep things interesting.

After each major "story arc", be sure to talk to your player and get his opinion on the game and its progress. Ask the hard questions: What are you enjoying the most? What do you dislike about the game? Which characters do you enjoy interacting with? What are your characters goals at this point?

With each answer, you'll get a better idea of where you can go next in the campaign or what aspects of Game Mastering are your strengths and weaknesses. If the plot isn't coming across clearly, this is a good way to find out and make sure that you slip in some extra clues in the sessions to come. Look for ways to improve in all areas, but don't feel that you have to give the player everything he wants or expects in order to run a good game.

With all this work, you might be wondering what happens next. If you've built a strong solo campaign, you want to make sure that it goes out with a bang. In the next article, I'll discuss making a big finish to your solo campaign. In the meantime, get creative with the elements you've introduced in to your story and start connecting them together.