Preserving Drama

Drama—built on tension and conflict—is necessary for good stories. Unlike a novel, a roleplaying game's protagonists don't automatically exhibit the perfect level of competence for the challenges faced; sometimes they aren't up to a challenge and sometimes a challenge offers no resistance at all.

Players experience the drama of a challenge while they feel that resistance. If a character has some feature that automatically defeats the challenge, that resistance is bypassed and the drama is lost. Dealing with this problem isn't easy. If you adjust these challenges clumsily (or "nerf" a character feature), you might find your players complaining about it on the internet the next day!

This supplement helps you, the game master, avoid scenarios where character features bypass these important scenes. It presents a methodical approach to identifying easily-defeated challenges and bolstering them, doing so without punishing players for their chosen features.

Modify Vulnerable Challenges

Preserving the drama of challenges begins at the design stage. You must first recognize which challenges are vulnerable to various character features. For example, a giant hedge maze tries to create tension by removing the party's sense of location and direction, but a little forethought is enough to recognize that a flying character can instantly and automatically deflate the drama by (literally) rising above it.

Ideally, the main conflicts of the campaign are built upon resilient challenges. Where challenges appear vulnerable, replace or modify them as part of the initial design. It's important to do this before you present the game to your players because players will build characters in the context of that concept.

Avoid Over-Efficient Features

It is natural and desirable that players create characters suited to the game. Once you present the concept, probably forecasting the main conflicts of the story, the players are likely to select characters or features that are competent in that realm—detective characters are appropriate for a murder mystery, soldiers for a war story, and nobles or diplomats suit a tale of courtly intrigue. But character-building to suit the game can go too far.

During the character creation process, be vigilant for features that are going to automatically obviate your important challenges. You can help preserve drama by gently suggesting these features be avoided. For example, if the game is about courtly politics, players might select features to help deconstruct social scheming, like bonuses to social rolls. That's fine. It's good! But you'd want to discourage a feature that *automatically* identifies lies, since that would be fatal to any level of intrigue.

If you suggest avoiding features, try not to seem like you're designing the protagonists. Character creation is part of the players' fun and should be limited only when necessary. If the players insist on features that will obviate the game's known challenges, this is a clue that they don't consider those scenes fun. It might mean you have the wrong premise. For example, players that want to automatically detect all traps in the Tomb of Many Traps adventure might prefer a different kind of story, sending you back to the drawing board.

Layer Challenges

A vulnerable challenge can be ruggedized by layering. Whether it's the core challenges faced in a multi-session story or just tonight's important conflict, you can preserve drama by adding more facets to the challenge. A layered challenge requires the party to display varying aptitudes or to succeed at several tasks. It is more likely to survive contact with a player's too-effective features, and it lets that player enjoy the chosen feature's usefulness.

Here's a combat-specific example. A game master worries that the party's priest will easily force all the undead guardians to flee. A game master new to this process might be tempted to use undead that are immune to the priest's power. However, that would make the feature feel un-useful or nerfed. Here are some alternatives:

✪ Only half of the undead are immune to the priest's power; the player still gets to shine but some of the challenge still requires a struggle

✪ The cult of necromancers who maintain the undead are visiting the tomb when the players arrive, creating a mixed creature-type encounter

✪ An enemy priest's power opposes that of the party's priest. To easily rebuke the undead, the party must first find and defeat the enemy priest who hides among these guardians.

✪ Successive challenges (like a hall of traps right after the fight with the undead) can preserve the drama of overcoming the tomb's defenses. This may sound like standard fare for roleplaying games, but narratively structured games often contemplate only a single type of guardian.

When it comes to layering challenges, there are some pitfalls to consider. First, layers should be logically constructed. If a single encounter too blatantly requires multiple competencies, it can look too "gamified," like a funhouse puzzle. Some of these combinations are genre-appropriate; a pirate buries her treasure, traps the location, and hides the map to reach it. But layers work better if the challenges themselves suggest those varied aspects.

Another common pitfall of layering challenges is making things too hard. Being unable to find (or think of) the right solution for a challenge is a common player frustration. Each new layer of your challenge has the potential to become a barrier to progress, rather than something to be struggled through. Therefore, consider each layer individually, but also contemplate the difficulty of the whole challenge.

Sacrifice Drama for Drama

You can sometimes skip the drama of challenges if the players will enjoy a quick success. Because you took the time to ruggedize the most important challenges of your long-term story, these scenarios are likely one-off encounters that come up during an individual session. Allowing the automatic bypassing of a challenge is fine in such cases. It's particularly advisable for challenges that don't carry narrative elements or when the players need to feel a win.

When the players easily overcome these challenges, you can prevent those conflicts from feeling like letdowns by turning them into rewarding moments. Let the players revel in a quick victory or two and remind them that they're good at what they do. Not everything should be a struggle, and players enjoy occasional examples of their competence. Up-beats in the story's cadence can break up the monotony of constant struggle. They also provide dramatic contrast for the scenes when things are harder; a few easy trials will lend drama to the harder ones.

Beware of using this technique too often. If the characters immediately overcome the material you've prepared, you can find yourself improvising the rest of the session to a degree you're not comfortable with. Grabbing a quick success then ending the game early defeats the purpose, leaving the players with less time to revel in their victory.

Summary

Mismatching challenges with the party will quickly drain the drama from the game, as will being caught adjusting those challenges on the fly.

To preserve the game's drama, remember to systematically:

- ✪ Recognize and modify vulnerable challenges before the players encounter them
- ✪ Discourage taking character features that will automatically defeat important drama
- ✪ Layer challenges to preserve some degree of effort or to require a variety of features
- ✪ Sacrifice some challenges when the game needs upbeats and those challenges aren't critical

Use these steps so your challenges have the best chance to deliver their inherent drama and keep the game going. Your players will thank you for it!

Credits

Writer: Randall Right

Steel Patrons: Abbi Taylor, An Actual Wombat, BlackbirdofTx, Brian Smith, Caitlin Bellinger, Celestina Knight, Charles Bryant, Chris, Craig Savage, David, David Dyer, Dragoon Of Kyri, Enrico Viscione, GenX Jedi, James Makkyla, Joseph Brown, Kerry McCorkle, krishna chivukula, Kyle Somers, Lara Ty, Luke Hermann, Luke Rule, Max David, Paul Carmichael, Paul S, Phillip Brown, Platypulogist, Scott Thomas, SonOfSofaman, Steve Yahner, Thomas Dutton, Tim

Everything Else: Matthew Perkins

Originally published 07/03/2022
Latest version 07/03/2022