
It's All In Your Head: Making Mental Movies

Contributed by theLevigator
Saturday, 13 October 2007
Last Updated Tuesday, 18 August 2009

Making Mental Movies

Some of my friends consider me the luckiest roleplayer in the world, because I get to roleplay for a living. I am a professional entertainer. I combine magical and mindreading effects with storytelling to create a character that can bend spoons, predict the future and move items without touching them. My goal as a performer is to be a storyteller that uses magical effects as a visual enhancement of those stories.

This may help to explain my philosophy of GM'ing. As a GM, I strive to create a vivid story that every player can clearly visualize in their minds. But instead of using magic tricks, I try to accomplish this with creativity, preparation, and the use of several tools that enhance my ability to create an immersive world. Even though roleplaying is generally a game of social interaction, most of the game actually takes place in our minds. Imagination is such a large part of this hobby of ours, and it is the driving force to my play style and design...

”Cinepic”

A few months ago, I was asked by a fellow GM to describe my play style in a single word. I had two in my mind and couldn't pick one over the other, so I smashed them together. Cinematic and Epic are the words that I believe best describe my play style. As a result, I coined the word “cinepic” to define my role playing mantra.

Cinematic

I approach GM'ing much in the same way I approach my performance style. I perform a type of magic called “bizarre magic”. Bizarre magic is storytelling magic, where the magic is a visual aid to the story being told. In bizarre magic, the story you are telling is often more important than the magical effect. It's the same for me with GM'ing. The rules, mechanics and tools I use are secondary to the story being told. I strive to make sure every gaming session has a definite beginning, middle, and end. I try to imagine the game as if it were a movie on my big screen. From description to pacing, I want it to feel cinematic.

Epic

No matter what the story, metaplot or campaign setting, I never forget that the player characters are the main characters

in my story. They are the eventual heroes that will save the day and have songs written about their exploits. This is equally important to me at low-level play as it is at high-level play. I gather as much information as I can from the players on not only how they perceive their character's progression, but also what kind of adventures they imagine for their characters. Using the player's input almost guarantees their interest in not only their characters, but the flow of the story as well.

Putting Them Together

Telling an epic tale that flows seamlessly from one session to the next requires a fair amount of planning. Giving it a cinematic feel also requires a good amount of planning as well. I use different encounter styles to create a world that breathes and lives. Combining timeline-based encounters with site-based encounters and character-based encounters assures variety and verisimilitude in our games. Once the metaplot and subplots are mapped out, I turn my attention to the cinematic aspects of the session. I put a lot of effort into descriptions, and imagine key moments as movie scenes being played out in my mind. To prioritize it, it might look something like this:

- Create a metaplot and several subplots. I use a timeline approach to this part of the game. I plan out several major events that will happen no matter what the party does in the game. Things like invasions, natural disasters, and assassinations are put on a timeline to help make the world feel more "real".

- Have players create characters and give me an idea of their character concept and wish list for character experiences. This will help me put hooks together that allow the characters to take turns in the spotlight and keep them interested in the overall story.

- Create Character Fate Paths. This is like a timeline that is specific to the individual characters. Things like family and friend deaths, homeland upheaval, and other personal demons fit into this part of my planning. This personal touch really seems to increase my player's enjoyment, and I think it helps them to keep seeing their characters as individuals, rather than just part of the party.

- Create a Party Fate Path. This is usually done by finding a common thread in the character backgrounds, and developing a recurring villain that evolves along with the party. Many times I will implement some kind of secret bond between the characters. Part of the game for the players is uncovering that bond or similarity.

- Finally, I start working on the first session. I usually start with an introduction that gives them a flavor for the kind of story we are building. I imagine this much like the opening dialogue of an epic fantasy movie. We start with a little background information on the world around the characters and recent major events. Next, we move into the character backgrounds to explain the point at which they enter the story. Once I've written the introduction, I create the opening scene. I try to combine all of the above elements to give the party as many choices as possible at the outset, knowing that their choices will inevitably be fewer as the game progresses. I try and imagine key moments as scenes from a movie, and determine the level of detail I will need to paint the proper picture.

I know this looks like a lot, but each of these areas is just a few sentences in length to give me a heading that I will develop as we go. Truthfully, most of this process can be done in less than an hour, once the characters are created. These five steps lay the foundation that will become our epic tale.

The next article will elaborate on campaign design using my current main group's current campaign. In the future, I plan to go into great detail on the rules modifications we have made to tailor the game to our play style, as well as the digital tools that I use to enhance our gaming experience. Thanks for reading, and I hope you found something useful! If you have any questions for me, send me an email at: thelevitator@gmail.com.

James Anthony is a professional mentalist who performs in the Great Lakes region of the US. In addition, James also plays drums in the band Vintage Burning. To learn more about James visit the following links:

www.spelz.com

www.myspace.com/thelevatorator

www.myspace.com/thevintageburning1