



Fantasy Seeds

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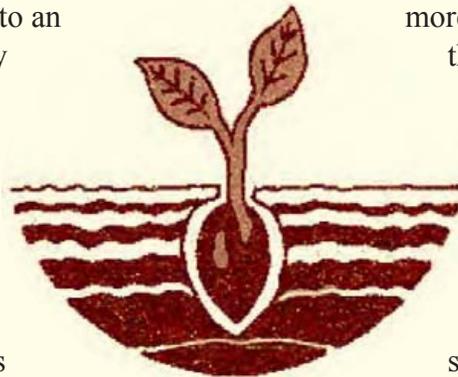
Introduction

Welcome to Seeds and to this first product in the new line by Expeditious Retreat Press. Seeds are story ideas, plot ideas, creature ideas, adventure hooks, anything that can grow into an enjoyable gaming experience. Each seed is small (only a paragraph or two at most) and each Seed product will be small as well (only four to five pages), but just like their namesakes, they have great potential when provided with the right environment.

Fantasy Seeds is roughly four pages packed with adventure ideas suitable for fantasy gaming. We're also collecting seeds for three other genres (horror, supers, modern) and there will be future Seeds in these categories. We've gathered this first bunch of seeds through a paid open submissions call at Enworld and RPGnet, but we hope that you'll be inclined to send us your seed ideas for perusal and possible inclusion in future Seeds products. We'd love a continual series of Seeds created by the very people who enjoy reading them the most.

So drop by the Expeditious Retreat website, checkout our submission guidelines to find out more about the process, and then send us your seeds. Hopefully you'll soon be reading the latest Seed containing your successful seeds. Whew! Enough with the alliteration already, on to the fun! And like always, the first one's for free...

Joseph Browning & Suzi Yee



During a nautical adventure, the PCs catch sight of a clutch of small, but very dangerous creatures sunning themselves on a coral reef. The PCs are in no immediate danger, as the creatures are more concerned with catching enough sea gulls to feed their brood than with them. However, the creatures make valuable familiars or are worth something as spell components. Does greed win out over common sense, as the treacherous currents make the reef more dangerous than the creatures that call it home?

Despite mounting evidence that he's growing senile in his old age, a once great paladin is gathering troops for a crusade to a distant, savage land to fight a rising threat that no one is sure actually exists.

The successful conquest of a neighboring kingdom pushes all the monsters and bandits from that land directly into the PCs path as they struggle to complete their mission.

A kingdom's laws change overnight, allowing duels to the death to settle matters of honor. Long simmering rivalries burst to the surface, and duel and counter duel lead to bloody feuds, and eventually to civil war, unless the PCs can calm the situation.

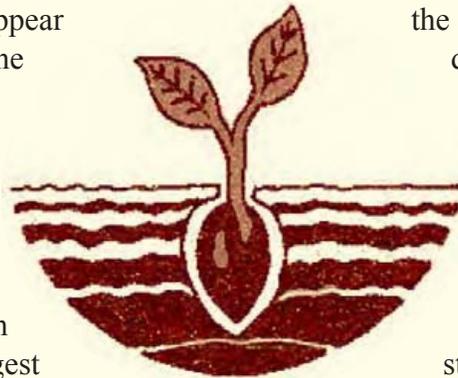
The party finds itself in the middle of a generations-old war between two pixie clans.

Philosopher's Flies begin plaguing local temples and universities. These tiny fairies feed on ambient wisdom and their swarms multiply in the presence of great thinkers. They're harmless, but annoying, constantly chattering to each other, misquoting great truths, and making any secretive movements impossible. Also, they're very hard to get rid of, as your most intellectual PCs are just about to discover.

Random, but necessary pieces of the PCs' mundane gear (minor spell components, sharpening stones, quill pens, etc) disappear while they camp. Investigating, the PCs discover that the thieves are "adventuring heroes" from a microscopic demiplane, and their quest for trinkets is as important to their world as the PCs own quests in their world.

It's revealed that the dominant, good-aligned church in the PCs' region has a vault filled with many evil and dangerous artifacts under the largest cathedral in the area. Whenever possible, these evil artifacts are destroyed, but those too dangerous or durable are stored here for safekeeping. In the name of security, the church is willing to kill even members of the faithful who discover the existence of the vault.

During their manhood ceremonies, the boys of a certain tribe prove their toughness with a series of brutal stick fights. Fights are to unconsciousness, and the scars gained are considered badges of honor. While passing through, the PCs are invited to watch (or if they really impress the tribe) to participate.



The players come to a small village only to find everyone in a panic. The townsfolk are in an uproar because their prized possession, the Gem of Azaria has been broken. The gem gave the town access to mysterious and wondrous powers, thereby providing the town with protection from general evils.

A seemingly worthless trinket that the PCs find is actually the key to a massive gate to an infernal plane. Agents of both good and evil forces hunt the party for the key but determining who is what is not a simple affair.

During a common underground dungeon crawl, an earthquake rattles the surrounding region. The party is not seriously injured, but the way back is hopelessly caved in, making any mapping done to this point utterly useless. The characters must now travel deeper into the caverns, hoping to find another passage leading to the outside world. Due to the earthquake, creature activity has increased in the cavern system, increasing the chance for wandering encounters. Pit traps and other pressure-sensitive traps may be set off or exposed, leading characters to believe formerly dangerous areas are now safe. However, structural damage may cause collapsing floors, walls, and/or ceilings at any point along the way, if the characters do not progress carefully. And there is always the chance of aftershocks...

A minor artifact has been removed from its hiding place, where it has remained for many years. One of the player characters is instantly aware of this fact, as the item was once in the possession of an ancestor of his (a fact not immediately known to the character) who hid it to keep it from falling into the wrong hands. The character feels compelled to find the item and hide it again. During the journey to locate the item, the character encounters other distant relatives, some he may know, some he may not, who are also under the same compulsion. No one knows exactly what the item is, but they will know in what direction it lies and when they are getting close to it

and will be able to identify it instantly on sight. If the item is now in the hands of someone who will use it for just reasons, the characters may have to find an alternative solution if they wish to take away the item and hide it again. The item has a powerful curse on it that affects those who keep it in their possession or use it for an extended period.

While traveling through a seldom-traveled part of the country, the PC's come across the remains of a caravan. The caravan appears to have come under siege by some unknown force and succumbed to their attackers. The caravan bears the markings of a rather well known band of explorers. The attack has recently happened and there is evidence that the attackers took prisoners. There are tracks leading away from the attack in the direction of nearby hills.

As the PC's approach a small village along the way to their next stop, they notice that there are not the normal sounds that should be coming from the village. No dogs barking, no children playing loudly, no sounds of machinery not even insects in the background. Once inside the village, the PC's find the townsfolk dead from an illness. Every one shows varying signs of sickness, and makeshift labs have been assembled with local fauna and other chemicals. Whatever has caused the town's sickness has not dissipated and is still highly contagious. Each hour the party stays in the village, a Fortitude Save is required. Failure of the Fortitude Save means that the party member has caught the illness as well.

The party awakens (this includes the whole party, even if there was a nightly watch as they mysteriously fell asleep) to find the campfire going and an old man sitting next to it. The old man is a powerful arch mage sent to warn the party about a growing evil in the mountains. An evil so old, nothing remains from the time of its creation. However, there is an artifact that might be able to force the evil back into slumber. The old man is familiar to one of the party members. However, they are

supposed to be the same age. After proving to the party who he really is, the old man tells them of a cave not far from here where he went into the cave a man, but emerged a frail, shadow of his former self.

The Blood Fountain

Deep in the heart of the Blisterwood Forest lies the Blood Fountain. Drinking of the fount's enchanted blood confers great strength and fortitude, but abuse of the fountain leads to a corrupting disease that inexorably turns one to evil. Many years ago, the Uisel, an order of elf paladins, destroyed the evil cult that protected the Blood Fountain, but were unable to destroy the artifact itself. Instead, they placed a permanent garrison there and destroyed all record of the fount, or so they hoped.

The party discovers the sole remaining reference to the Blood Fountain, a map, a message or simply a reference in a large codex of arcane knowledge. Further investigation reveals a suspicious lack of any other information about the Blood Fountain and raises the ire of the Uisel. Confronting the order is only the first hurdle: over the years, the garrison posted at the Blood Fountain has fallen under its evil sway and have come under the control of Pavest, a lich and former member of the evil cult that protected the fount. Pavest has great plans, the first stage of which involves creating an evil army fueled by the Blood Fountain. He is cunning, powerful, and not about to let the PCs get in the way of his vengeance against the Uisel or his domination of the kingdom.

The Dead Lover

Dower is a simple priest of a good-aligned god. He is the spiritual leader of a small community in the highlands, an area ruled by the towering Castle Calier and the debauched Lady Luxana Porine. Recently, trouble has come to Dower and his people. Strange beasts roam the roads at night: pitch black horses that race like the wind, huge swarms of bats and packs of sleek, white wolves. Dower himself has fallen ill. His nights are restless and he can be heard crying out in



his sleep, but no one can wake him until dawn. His waking hours are spent in a haggard state and he often lapses into incoherent mumbling. Meanwhile, raucous debaucheries in Castle Calier continue unabated.

Lady Porine is a powerful vampire who delights in corrupting moral men like Dower. She has dominated him for some weeks now and at night uses an enhanced nightmare spell to trouble his soul further. In his nightmares, Dower is a powerful noble in a distant land where he lives a decadent life of evil with his lover, a disguised Luxana.

The Beast of Erinton

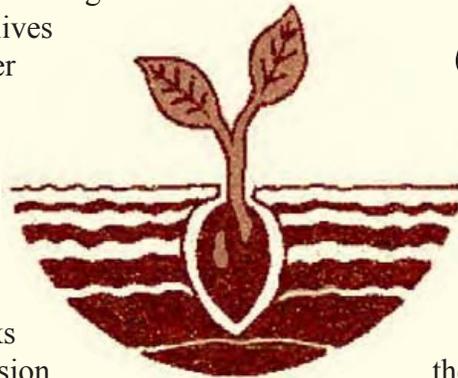
A terrible beast is killing commoners and peasants in the city of Erinton. For some time the attacks went unnoticed, but one month ago the mayor's daughter, Isa Horun, was slain while visiting the ill in the Low Quarters. Now, the entire city lives in fear, and the beast continues to elude the Silver Palm, the city's guards. There are only a handful of survivors, and their reports are vague or conflicting, but it is apparent that the beast is some kind of wolf.

The beast is actually a fiendish dire wolf, but it is only a tool. A powerful summoner, Yarl Colum, controls the dire wolf. Yarl leads a cult opposed to the mayor's rule of Erinton. The Bloody Maw seeks to use the wolf in order to spread fear and dissension amongst the people of Erinton and eventually to overthrow Mayor Horun and the Silver Palm. Their ranks include a number of evil clerics and rogues along with several nobles, the Mayor's sister Kalyne and Gerar Fost, the Silver Palm's second-in-command.

Traitorous Designs

King Alcair is dying. The disease appears to be magical, but not even the most powerful casters in the realm can cure him. The King's steward, the cleric Kyle Waln, has received an oracular vision from his deity that the King can only be cured by the Tears of Twilight. The message is vague, but Waln has not hesitated to send out scores of the King's best men to search for these Tears, whatever they may be.

In the meantime, the kingdom's defenses are greatly weakened, and the neighboring nation of Palurn quietly prepares for war. They expect a swift victory, for Kyle Waln is their own agent. Long years of careful planning, espionage and magical research have placed the Waln family in good standing with the Alcair dynasty, unquestioningly under the evil sway of Palurn, and in possession of an artifact which is slowly killing King Alcair. This is the seed for a series of adventures. The party is one of those sent out by Kyle Waln. Their quest is harrowing but fruitless. Along the kingdom's border, they witness the forming Palurian army, and must escape with this intelligence. The news is reported to Kyle Waln, of course, and he attempts to have the PCs assassinated. The PCs must expose the traitor and avert the coming war.



Corruption

A ravaging dire bear, usually a creature of the deep forest, attacks the hamlet of Japic. A corrupted wound found on its corpse explains the bear's unusual behavior. Only the dwarves that live in the mountains beyond the forest have such weapons as to cause the wound. The PCs traverse the forest to find the dwarves expanding their territory at a furious pace, clear-cutting the forest below their mountain in order to fuel their expansion. The dwarves have found a particularly rich vein of mithral and are excited about the discovery. But precious ore is not the only thing they have found. Their furious mining has awoken dire creatures in the depths of the mountain; murderous beasts that begin to attack the dwarves. Worse, the stubborn dwarves are unwilling to admit their troubles and under the sway of a vengeful aranea sorcerer, the dwarf council rebuffs the party.

However, there is a small resistance, which entreats the PCs to help them. These insurgents are willing to bargain: they will slow their destruction of the forest if the party will rid their hearth of its corruption.

Liberators

Dissidents in the Gagash, a goblin tribe, want to leave and start their own clan, following a charismatic and non-violent seer. Their tyrannical chieftain, Wapak Spiderskewer, refuses their entreaties and punishes the dissidents incessantly. One cult member, Suza, manages to escape and entreats the party to liberate her fellows. Faced with the party's prowess and internal dissention, Wapak allows the dissidents to leave.

However, months ago, he planted a spy amongst the cultists. While the PCs escort the cultists to a new home, the spy helps scouts from the Gagash track the party's movements. Wapak leads a war party to the cults new home and attacks when he's certain the party has left. Again, Suza manages to escape the carnage and finds the PCs once more. Wapak, not content merely with punishing the dissidents, is now bent on vengeance and is creating alliances with several goblin tribes to hunt down the party.

Flight of the Gorgons

In the mountain valley of Harcor, a flight of harpies are corralling entire herds of gorgons. The flight is led by the harpy Ranger known simply as Piercing. Piercing has been a threat to the area for years, but has recently subjugated a flight of her own and now begins to further her ambitions to control the entire mountain range. There are few civilized settlements anywhere near Harcor, but a small tribe of unusually intelligent hill giants calls the mountain valley home.

The hill giants, once their trust is earned by the PCs, are powerful allies. However, Piercing's flight is becoming a true menace, especially now that she has found an ally in Turnoi, a juvenile red dragon. Together, Piercing and Turnoi have managed to create a few half-dragon gorgons and have mated themselves to produce a clutch of half-dragon harpies.

The Root of Evil

An evil druid is corrupting the treants of the forest. Olar is a disgruntled half-elf, denigrated by both of his parents' communities and finally cast out of his village for killing his brother. He spent long years in the depths of the forest, barely surviving.

When a kindly druid took Olar under his care, things seemed to turn around for the half-elf. However, evil had planted an undeniable seed in him, making Olar a difficult student. His druid patron finally sent Olar away.

Now, alone again and burning with anger, Olar uses his druidic abilities to wreak havoc on those who have wronged him. He has created a special salve that twists treants into wrathful machines of evil and has already directed his minions to destroy the grove of his former master. Now, Olar marches which his treants to the village that had exiled him. There will be no ransom or mercy.

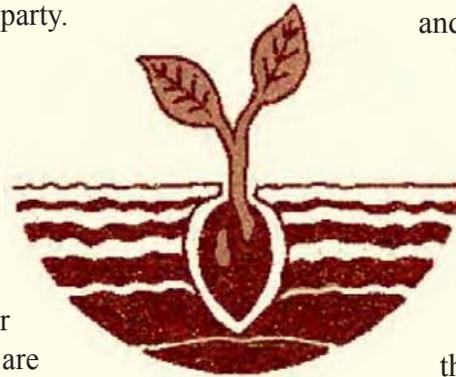
Cold Flame

A single centaur, wounded and confused, stumbles from the forest, mumbling only something about the living shadows and the cold flame. Even when his wounds are healed, he remains incoherent until his wisdom is restored.

Gerick's tribe lived peacefully alongside a tribe of wild elves for centuries. A month ago, the elf tribe suddenly disappeared with hardly a trace. Gerick led a small band of warriors to search for their long-time allies, and managed to track them to a ruined village at the forest's edge. But the elves were different: twisted by a foul enchantress, they captured and tortured Gerick and his companions.

The torture consisted of throwing the centaurs deep into the catacombs beneath the ruined village temple, where dwelt numerous undead horrors. Gerick's ravings allude to the shadows and allips that he encountered there, and their strength draining attacks.

Now, the enchantress and her subjugated minions hunt the rest of Gerick's tribe, hurling their captives into the catacombs and cruelly betting on how long they will survive. With the new influx of victims, the number of undead in the catacombs grows, and they have begun to wander outside, menacing the forest at large.



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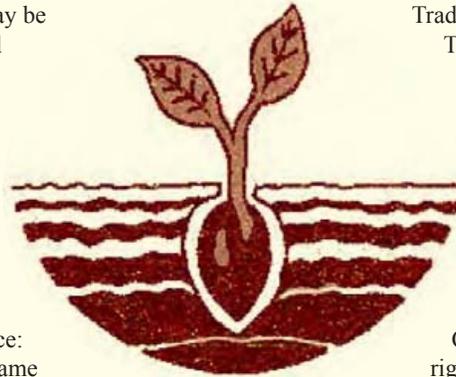
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WHAT follows is a scrap of trivia . . . my collection of *RPG plots*, in abstract form. I built this by examining the premises of hundreds of published adventures for all systems (including those systems dear and departed from print), trying to boil them down to common denominators. The results are presented here: arbitrary, and sometimes redundant. Nevertheless, I turn to this list when I'm stuck for a fresh premise for next week's session of my campaign, whatever that campaign might happen to be about at the time. It helps me keep from falling into thematic ruts (my least favorite kind). With any luck, it might serve a similar function for you.

Note: The "plots" are arranged in alphabetical order by title. Since the titles are arbitrary, this serves no useful function at all. And if you want shakespearean five-act hoozits, plot trees, Man Versus Himself and other Serious Literary Bunkum, try *Writer's Digest*. This ain't Oxford, baby.

❁ Handy Tip! ❁

Don't Panic. A lot of GMs come to the Big List only once they've *begun* to panic. Don't crucify yourself just yet! In particular, don't fuss too much over plot, as many GMs do. All of the plots here can provide a tried-and-true, simple *structure*, and structure is *all* you need a plot for in a role-playing game. Remember to play to the *strengths of the medium* – most all of which are about *character*, not plot. Only in an RPG can you experience a fictional character on a personal, first-hand level. Outline your adventures to make the most of that. Any plot that contains more than a basic structure is more likely to pull attention *away* from character, and that's burning the bridge for firewood. All you need to do is be ready to roll with the curves and have fun hamming it up. Relax. Game.

Copyright ©1999, 2002 by S. John Ross. The Handy Tip stopped already, and you've strayed into the Boring Legalese Zone! Aieee!

The BIG LIST

A GM'S AID BY S. JOHN ROSS
VERSION TWO

of RPG Plots

ANY OLD PORT IN A STORM

The PCs are seeking shelter from the elements or some other threat, and come across a place to hole up. They find that they have stumbled across something dangerous, secret, or supernatural, and must then deal with it in order to enjoy a little rest.

Common Twists & Themes: The shelter contains the cause of the threat the PCs were trying to avoid. The shelter houses a Hidden Base (q.v.). The PCs must not only struggle for shelter, they must struggle to survive. The place *is* a legitimate shelter of some kind, but the PCs are not welcome, and must win hearts or minds to earn their bed for the night.

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

Some bad guys have arrived and done some bad guy things. The PCs were none the wiser. The bad guys have now made good their escape, and the PCs have caught wind of it in time to chase them down before they make it back to their lair, their home nation, behind enemy lines, etc.

Common Twists & Themes: The bad guys escaped by stealing a conveyance that the PCs know better than they do. The bad guys duck down a metaphorical (or literal) side-road, trying to hide or blend into an environment (often one hostile to

the PCs). If the bad guys cross the adventure's "finish line" (cross the county line, make the warp jump, etc.) there's no way to pursue them beyond it.

BLACKMAIL

Usually through trickery (but sometimes by digging into the PCs' past), an antagonist has something to hold over the heads of the PCs and make them jump. This could be any kind of threat from physical to social, but it depends on the villain having something - even if it's information - that others don't have. Now, he is pulling the strings of the PCs, telling them to do things they don't want to. The PCs must end the cycle of blackmail, deprive the villain of his edge, and keep him temporarily satisfied while doing it.

Common Twists & Themes: The adventure hook involves the PCs doing the villain a good turn, which allows him to take advantage of them (very cynical!). To succeed, the PCs must contact other folks that are also being used. The PCs aren't the victims at all, but somebody they care about/are charged to protect, is.

BREAKING AND ENTERING

Mission objective: enter the dangerous place, and retrieve the vital dinguus or valuable person. Overcome the area's defenses to do so.

Common Twists & Themes: The goal is not to extract a thing, but to destroy a thing or interfere with a process (kill the force-screen generator, assassinate the evil king, stop the spell from being cast, wreck the

invasion plans, close the portal). The goal has moved. The goal is information, which must be broadcast or otherwise released from the area as soon as it is found. The job must be done without alerting anyone. The PCs don't know the place is dangerous. The PCs must replace the thing with another thing.

CAPTURE THE FLAG

The PCs must secure a military target for the good guys. There are bad guys there that prefer **not** to be secured. The fundamental tactical scenario.

Common Twists & Themes: The PCs must assemble and/or train a force to do the job with them. The PCs are working with flawed intelligence and the target zone isn't as described. The PCs must coordinate their own efforts with an ally group (possibly putting aside rivalries to do so). The target zone includes a population of innocent people, fragile goods, or some other precious thing that mustn't be harmed in the crossfire.

CLEARING THE HEX

There is a place where bad things live. The PCs must make it safe for nice people, systematically clearing it of danger.

Common Twists & Themes: The bad things can't be beaten with direct conflict. The PCs must learn more about them to solve the problem. The Haunted House. The Alien Infestation. The Wild Forest.

DELVER'S DELIGHT

The PCs are treasure-hunters, who have caught wind of a treasure-laden ruin. They go to explore it, and must deal with its supernatural denizens to win the treasure and get out alive.

Common Twists & Themes: The treasure itself is something dangerous. The treasure isn't in a ruin, but in a wilderness or even hidden somewhere "civilized." The treasure is someone else's rightful property. The treasure turns out to have a will of its own.

DON'T EAT THE PURPLE ONES

The PCs are stranded in a strange place, and must survive by finding food and shelter, and then worry about getting back home.

Common Twists & Themes: The PCs must survive only for a short period of time, until help arrives, the ship and/or radio is repaired, or some such thing (in "repair" scenarios, sometimes the PCs must discover some fact about the local environment that will make such repairs possible).

ELEMENTARY, MY DEAR WATSON

A crime or atrocity has been committed; the PCs must solve it. They must interview witnesses (and prevent them from being killed), gather clues (and prevent them from being stolen or ruined). They must then assemble proof to deliver to the authorities, or serve as personal ministers of justice.

Common Twists & Themes: The PCs are working to clear an innocent already accused (possibly themselves). The PCs must work alongside a special investigator or are otherwise saddled with an unwanted ally. Midway through the adventure, the PCs are "taken off the case" – their invitation/authority to pursue the matter is closed (often the result of political maneuvering by an antagonist). The climax is a courtroom scene or other arena of judgment. The scale is highly variable for this type of adventure, from a small-town murder to a planetwide pollution scandal.

ESCORT SERVICE

The PCs have a valuable object or person, which needs to be taken to a safe place or to its rightful owner, etc. They must undertake a dangerous journey in which one or more

Handy Tip!

Double up. A nice basic method is the chameleon game, where an adventure presents itself as one type of story in the "hook layer" but reveals itself as something else. Sometimes, the switch is innocent and natural – *Don't Eat the Purple Ones*, for example, makes a good hook for *Running the Gauntlet*, and *Most Peculiar, Momma* is a logical lead for *Pandora's Box*. Sometimes, the switch is something more sinister or deliberate, with NPCs selling the adventure as one thing when it's really another. This can *still* be innocent, in its way, if the NPCs have been duped themselves, or if they're just desperate for help and worried that nobody will be eager to tackle the *real* problem.

factions (and chance and misfortune) try to deprive them of the thing in their care.

Common Twists & Themes: The thing or person is troublesome, and tries to escape or sidetrack the PCs. The destination has been destroyed or suborned by the enemy, and the PCs must take upon themselves the job that either the destination or their charge was meant to do when it got there. The person is a person attempting a political defection. Safe arrival at the destination doesn't end the story; the PCs must then bargain with their charge as their token (exchanging money for a hostage, for instance). The PCs must protect the target without the target *knowing* about it.

GOOD HOUSEKEEPING

The PCs are placed in charge of a large operation (a trading company, a feudal barony, the CIA) and must, despite lack of experience in such things, make it work and thrive.

Common Twists & Themes: The PCs are brought in because something big is about to happen, and the Old Guard wants a chance to escape. The peasants, neighbors, employees,

etcetera resent the PCs, because their method of inheritance looks outwardly bad and everybody loved the old boss.

HELP IS ON THE WAY

A person (church group, nation, galaxy) is in a hazardous situation they can't survive without rescue. The PCs are on the job. In some scenarios, the hook is as simple as a distant yell or crackly distress signal.

Common Twists & Themes: The victim(s) is (are) a hostage, or under siege from enemy forces, and the PCs must deal with the captors or break the siege. There is a danger that any rescue attempts will strand the rescuers in the same soup as the rescues, compounding the problem. The rescues aren't people, but animals, robots, or something else. The "victim" doesn't realize that he needs rescuing; he thinks he's doing something reasonable and/or safe. The threat isn't villain-oriented at all; it's a natural disaster, nuclear meltdown, or disease outbreak. The rescues *can't leave*; something immobile and vital must be tended to or dealt with at the adventure location. The PCs begin as part of the rescues, and must escape and gather forces or resources to bring back and proceed as above.

HIDDEN BASE

The PCs, while traveling or exploring, come across a hornet's nest of bad guys, preparing for Big Badness. They must either find some way to get word to the good guys, or sneak in and disable the place themselves, or a combination of both.

Common Twists & Themes: The PCs must figure out how to use local resources in order to defend themselves or have a chance against the inhabitants.

HOW MUCH FOR JUST THE DINGUS?

Within a defined area, something important and valuable exists. The PCs (or their employers) want it, but so do one or more other groups. The

* Handy Tip! *

Surrender yourself to metaphor. I've written the plots in the language of (typically very physical) action-adventure genres, because that's the basic form of roleplaying adventure – but if you're playing on more levels than that, the list can still punch its weight. Just remember that every thing, place, and foe can *really* be a piece of information, person, and unhealthy attitude, as surely as a space station can be a dungeon and a magical residue can be a fingerprint.

ones that get it will be the ones that can outthink and outrace the others, deal best with the natives of the area, and learn the most about their target. Each competing group has its own agenda and resources.

Common Twists & Themes: The natives require the competing factions to gather before them as pals to state their cases. The valuable thing was en route somewhere when its conveyance or courier wrecked or vanished.

I BEG YOUR PARDON?

The PCs are minding their own business when they are attacked or threatened. They don't know why. They must solve the mystery of their attacker's motives, and in the meantime fend off more attacks. They must put two and two together to deal with the problem.

Common Twists & Themes: The PCs have something that the bad guys want - but they don't necessarily realize it. The bad guys are out for revenge for a dead compatriot from a previous adventure. The bad guys have mistaken the PCs for somebody else.

LONG OR SHORT FORK WHEN DINING ON ELF?

The PCs are a diplomatic vanguard, trying to open up (or shore up) either political or trade relations with a strange culture. All they have to do is manage for a day or so among the strange customs without offending anybody . . . and what information they have is both incomplete and dangerously misleading.

Common Twists & Themes: The PCs were chosen by somebody who knew they weren't prepared for it - an NPC trying to sabotage the works (pinning this villain might be necessary to avert disaster).

LOOK, DON'T TOUCH

The PCs are working surveillance – spying on a person, gathering information on a beast in the wild, scouting a new sector. Regardless of the scale, the primary conflict (at least at the start) is the rule that they are *only* to watch, listen and learn. They are not to make contact or let themselves be known.

Common Twists & Themes: The target gets itself in trouble and the PCs must decide whether to break the no-contact rule in order to mount a rescue.

MANHUNT

Someone is gone: they've run away, gotten lost, or simply haven't called home in a while. Somebody misses them or needs them returned. The PCs are called in to find them and bring them back.

Common Twists & Themes: The target has been kidnapped (possibly to specifically lure the PCs). The target is dangerous and escaped from a facility designed to protect the public. The target is valuable and escaped from a place designed to keep him safe, cozy, and conveniently handy. The target has a reason for leaving that the PCs will sympathize with. The target has stumbled across

❁ Handy Tip! ❁

Double up, part two: Some very satisfying adventures weave two separate (or thematically-related) plots together. An easy way to make this work is to make one plot *physical* and the other plot *personal*. That way just one of the plots puts demand on the PCs' location, while the other one can tag along anywhere. For example: the PCs are hired to escort a prince to a summit so he can appear before the masses and end a war (a physical and simple example of Escort Service), but on the way, they realize that the poor guy is *suicidal* because state obligations have ruined his love life, and must prevent his self-destruction by either fixing the problem or convincing him to shoulder the burden (a personal and metaphorical example of Ounces of Prevention).

another adventure (either as protagonist or victim), which the PCs must then undertake themselves. The missing "person" is an entire expedition or pilgrimage of some kind. The target isn't a runaway *or* missing/lost – they're just someone that the PCs have been hired to track down (possibly under false pretenses).

MISSING MEMORIES

One or more of the PCs wakes up with no memory of the recent past, and now they find themselves in some kind of trouble they don't understand. The PCs must find the reason for the memory lapse, and solve any problems they uncover in the meantime.

Common Twists & Themes: The forgetful PCs voluntarily suppressed or erased the memories, and they find themselves undoing their own work.

MOST PECULIAR, MOMMA

Something both bad and inexplicable is happening (racial tension is being fired up in town, all the power is out, the beer supply is drained, it's snowing in July, *Voyager* still has fans, hordes of aliens are eating all the cheese), and a lot of people are very troubled by it. The PCs must track the phenomenon to its source, and stop it.

Common Twists & Themes: The PCs are somehow unwittingly responsible for the whole thing. What seems to be a problem of one nature (technological, personal, biological, chemical, magical, political, etc) is actually a problem of an alternate one.

NO ONE HAS SOILED THE BRIDGE

The PCs are assigned to guard a single vital spot (anything from a mountain pass to a solar system) from impending or possible attack. They must plan their defensive strategy, set up watches, set traps, and so on, and then deal with the enemy when it arrives.

Common Twists & Themes: The intelligence the PCs was given turns out to be faulty, but acting on the new information could result in greater danger - but so could *not* acting on it, and the PCs must choose or create a compromise. The PCs learn that the enemy has good and sympathetic reason for wanting to destroy the protected spot.

NOT IN KANSAS

The PCs are minding their own business and find themselves transported to a strange place. They must figure out where they are, why they are there and how to escape.

Common Twists & Themes: They were brought there specifically to

help someone in trouble. They were brought there by accident, as a by-product of something strange and secret. Some of the PCs' enemies were transported along with them (or separately), and now they have a new battleground, and innocents to convince which guys are the good guys.

OUNCES OF PREVENTION

A villain or organization is getting ready to do something bad, and the PCs have received a tip-off of some sort. They must investigate to find out more about the caper, and then act to prevent it.

Common Twists & Themes: The initial tip-off was a red herring meant to distract the PCs from the actual caper. There are two simultaneous Bad Things on the way, and no apparent way to both of them – how to choose?

PANDORA'S BOX

Somebody has tinkered with Things Man Ought Not, or opened a portal to the Mean People Dimension, cracked a wall at the state prison, or summoned an ancient Babylonian god into a penthouse. Before the PCs can even think of confronting the source of the trouble, they must deal with the waves of trouble already released by it: monsters, old foes out for vengeance, curious aliens who think cars/citizens/McDonald's hamburgers resemble food, and so forth.

Common Twists & Themes: The PCs can't simply take the released badness to the mat; they have to collect it and shove it back into the source before it the adventure can really end. The PCs are drawn in to the source and must solve problems on the other side before returning to this one. A secret book, code, or other rare element is necessary to plug the breach (maybe just the fellow who opened it). A close cousin to this plot is the basic "somebody has traveled into the past and messed with our reality" story.

QUEST FOR THE SPARKLY HOOZITS

Somebody needs a dingus (to fulfill a prophecy, heal the monarch, prevent a war, cure a disease, or what have you). The PCs must find a dingus. Often an old dingus, a mysterious dingus, and a powerful dingus. The PCs must learn more about it to track it down, and then deal with taking it from wherever it is.

Common Twists & Themes: The dingus is incomplete when found (one of the most irritating and un-fun plot twists in the universe). Somebody already owns it (or recently stole it, sometimes with legitimate claim or cause). The dingus is information, or an idea, or a substance, not a specific dingus. The PCs must “go undercover” or otherwise infiltrate a group or society, gaining the dingus by guile or stealth.

RECENT RUINS

A town, castle, starship, outpost, or other civilized construct is lying in ruins. Very recently, it was just dandy. The PCs must enter the ruins, explore them, and find out what happened.

Common Twists & Themes: Whatever ruined the ruins (including mean people, weird radiation, monsters, a new race, ghosts) is still a threat; the PCs must save the day. The inhabitants destroyed themselves. The “ruins” are a derelict ship or spaceship, recently discovered. The “ruin” is a ghost town, stumbled across as the PCs travel - but the map says the town is alive and well.

RUNNING THE GAUNTLET

The PCs must travel through a hazardous area, and get through without being killed, robbed, humiliated, debased, diseased, or educated by whatever is there. The troubles they encounter are rarely personal in nature - the place *itself* is the “villain” of the adventure.

✿ Handy Tip! ✿

Throw yourself a curve. Your players will, anyway, so practice early. Pick two random entries from the Big List and make your adventure on those, no matter what comes up - the first one is the hook layer; the second is the meat of the adventure. If the same entry comes up both times, go with it! Two layers can have a similar structure but very different roots or details.

Common Twists & Themes: The place isn't dangerous at all, and the various “dangers” are actually attempts to communicate with the party by some agent or another.

SAFARI

The PCs are on a hunting expedition, to capture or kill and elusive and prized creature. They must deal with its environment, its own ability to evade them, and possibly its ability to fight them.

Common Twists & Themes: The creature is immune to their devices and weapons. There are other people actively protecting the creature. The creature's lair allows the PCs to stumble onto another adventure.

SCORE ONE FOR THE HOME TEAM

The PCs are participants in a race, contest, tournament, scavenger hunt or other voluntary bit of sport. They must win.

Common Twists & Themes: The other contestants are less honest, and the PCs must overcome their attempts to win dishonestly. The PCs are competing for a deeper purpose than victory, such as to keep another contestant safe, or spy on one, or just to get into the place where the event goes down. The PCs don't wish

to win; they just wish to prevent the villain from winning. The event is a deliberate test of the PCs abilities (for entry into an organization, for example). The event becomes more deadly than it's supposed to.

STALAG 23

The PCs are imprisoned, and must engineer an escape, overcoming any guards, automatic measures, and geographic isolation their prison imposes on them.

Common Twists & Themes: Something has happened in the outside world and the prison security has fallen lax because of it. The PCs have been hired to “test” the prison - they aren't normal inmates. Other prisoners decide to blow the whistle for spite or revenge. The PCs are undercover to spy on a prisoner, but are then mistaken for real inmates and kept incarcerated. The PCs must escape on a tight schedule to get to another adventure outside the walls.

TAKE US TO MEMPHIS AND DON'T SLOW DOWN

The PCs are on board a populated conveyance (East Indiaman, Cruise Ship, Ferry, Sleeper Starship), when it is hijacked. The PCs must take action while the normals sit and twiddle.

Common Twists & Themes: The “hijackers” are government agents pulling a complicated caper, forcing the PCs to choose sides. The hijackers don't realize there is a secondary danger that must be dealt with, and any attempt to convince them is viewed as a trick. The normals are unhelpful or even hostile to the PCs because they think the PCs are just making matters worse.

TROUBLEMAKERS

A bad guy (or a group of them, or multiple parties) is kicking up a ruckus, upsetting the neighbors, poisoning the reservoirs, or otherwise causing trouble. The PCs have to go where the trouble is, locate the bad guys, and stop the party.



Handy Tip!



And finally, here's **The Little List of Nearly-Universal Plot Twists That Work With Almost Any Plot Ever:** The PCs must work alongside an NPC or organization they'd rather not pal around with (those who are normally rivals or villains, or just a snooty expert sent along to "help" them, etc). The victims are really villains and the villains are really victims. The PCs meet others who can help them, but won't unless the PCs agree to help them with their own causes. The villain is somebody the PCs know personally, even respect or love (or someone they fall for, mid-story). The PCs must succeed without violence, or with special discretion. The PCs must

succeed without access to powers, equipment, or other resources they're used to having. The villain is a recurring foil. Another group comparable to the PCs has already failed to succeed, and their bodies/equipment/etc provide clues to help the PCs do better. There are innocents nearby that the PCs must keep safe while dealing with the adventure. The adventure begins suddenly and without warning or buildup; the PCs are tossed into the fire of action in scene one. The PCs must pretend to be someone else, or pretend to be themselves but with very different allegiances, values or tastes. The PCs can't do everything and must choose: which evil to

thwart? Which innocents to rescue? Which value or ideal to uphold? The PCs must make a personal sacrifice or others will suffer. The PCs aren't asked to *solve* the problem, just to render aid against a backdrop of larger trouble: get in a shipment of supplies, sneak out a patient that needs medical help, or so on. One of the PCs is (or is presumed to be) a lost heir, fulfillment of a prophecy, a volcano god, or some other savior and/or patsy, which is why the PCs must do whatever the adventure is about. There is another group of PC-like characters "competing" on the same adventure, possibly with very different goals for the outcome.

Common Twists & Themes: The PCs must not harm the perpetrator(s); they must be bagged alive and well. The bad guys have prepared something dangerous and hidden as "insurance" if they are captured. The "bad guy" is a monster or dangerous animal (or an intelligent creature that everybody thinks is a monster or animal). The "bad guy" is a respected public figure, superior officer, or someone else abusing their authority, and the PCs might meet hostility from normally-helpful quarters who don't accept that the bad guy is bad. A balance of power perpetuates the trouble, and the PCs must choose sides to tip the balance and fix things. The "trouble" is diplomatic or political, and the PCs must make peace, not war.

UNCHARTED WATERS

The PCs are explorers, and their goal is to enter an unknown territory and scope it out. Naturally, the job isn't just going to be surveying and drawing sketches of local fauna; something is there, something fascinating and threatening.

Common Twists & Themes: Either the place itself is threatening (in

which case the PCs must both play National Geographic and simultaneously try to escape with their skin, sanity, and credit rating) or the place itself is very valuable and wonderful, and something *else* there is keen on making sure the PCs don't let anyone else know. Other potential conflicts involve damage to the PCs' conveyance or communication equipment, in which case this becomes Don't Eat the Purple Ones.

WE'RE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

Any of the basic plots in this list can be reengineered with the PCs on the outside of it. Either the PCs are accompanying other characters in the midst of such a plot (often being called on to defend the plot from the outside, as it were), or they are minding their own business when the others involved in the plot show up, and must pick sides or simply resist. For instance, with Any Old Port In The Storm, the PCs could already be enjoying (or native to) the shelter when a strange group arrives. If the "the PCs are unwelcome" variant is employed, then perhaps the PCs will

be the only voice of reason to still the religious fervor, racial prejudice, anti-monster sentiment, or whatever else is the source of conflict.

Common Twists & Themes: The PCs find themselves on the receiving end of the adventure. Take any of the plots here and reverse them, placing the PCs in the position where NPCs (often the villain, fugitive, etcetera) normally are. Instead of hunting, they must be hunted. Instead of fixing, they must avoid getting "fixed" themselves (ow). Alternately, leave a classic plot intact but turn the *twists* upside down, making them twistier (or refreshingly *untwisty*).

Dedicated!

The Big List of RPG Plots is dedicated to the many, many fans who've let me know how helpful it's been, and especially to those who've helped make it better: Peter Barnard, Glen Barnett, Colin Clark, David Lott, Jason Puckett, Marc Rees, Carrie Schutrick, and Jeff Yaus, plus a few mysterious heroes who never let me know their true identities. This is for all the GMs out there logging the hours to give their players an enjoyable game.