



WORLD BUILDER & GAME MASTER'S GUIDE

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WORLD BUILDING

There are few things in gaming more satisfying than creating your own worlds and adventures and watching your friends enjoy it. In this chapter we'll tell you some of our favorite world-building techniques and processes. We'll also share what's worked for us in creating our award-winning worlds, some of which have been going strong for *decades*.

One of the reasons we made *Savage Worlds* is so we could play in all these different settings with one set of rules. We like playing and learning from *all* games, but love having a core system we can come back to that's easy to modify or even just run as-is. In fact, we think you'll find many settings don't need a single new Edge, Hindrance, or power. That means you can concentrate on what your world is about, what the heroes do there, what kinds of fantastic treasures they might find, and who their opponents are.

ADVENTURES TOO!

The tips in this chapter will also help you design adventures, including those you might want to drop into published worlds such as our own *Deadlands*, *Rippers*, or *50 Fathoms*. Even those GMs who mostly run prepared adventures or Pinnacle's Plot

Point Campaigns often need to fill in the gaps when your players go "off the map."

We know most of you like to do both. You might run a *Last Parsec* campaign for a bit, then try a few sessions in a world inspired by your own imagination, the latest Hollywood blockbuster, a novel, or comics.

Or maybe you love a particular world created by another company for another system and want to "Savage" it, as our friends and fans often say. We've got some advice for you there, too.

THE MOST IMPORTANT PART

When creating your new world, start by identifying its core elements. What makes it special? What are the themes? Is it fantasy? Is it science fiction? Is it science fantasy? Is there something that grabs your friends' attention because it's cool and different? If so, what is it?

Or maybe your world is just your personal take on a genre you and your group already know you love. Not everything has to be original. Sometimes it's great to adventure in a really well-executed version of something you already know excites you and your friends.

Before you go any further, write down what makes your world exciting to you. What are you anxious to explore or for your friends to see. This is by far the most important part of the whole process, and putting it in black and white right from the start will help guide you through the rest of the steps we're about to discuss.

Example: *There are a few guiding principles in the Weird Wars line that gets me excited. One is commanding troops. That doesn't just mean telling them what to do, it also means being responsible for them and managing their issues when the GM brings them to light. That's a very different experience from most genres.*

The second is reveling in the history of the period. Nothing makes a grognard happier than sharing their knowledge and appreciation of some historical event or period. Allowing them to live in that world and showing it to those who aren't as familiar grounds the party in reality, and makes the inevitable arrival of the supernatural all the more interesting.

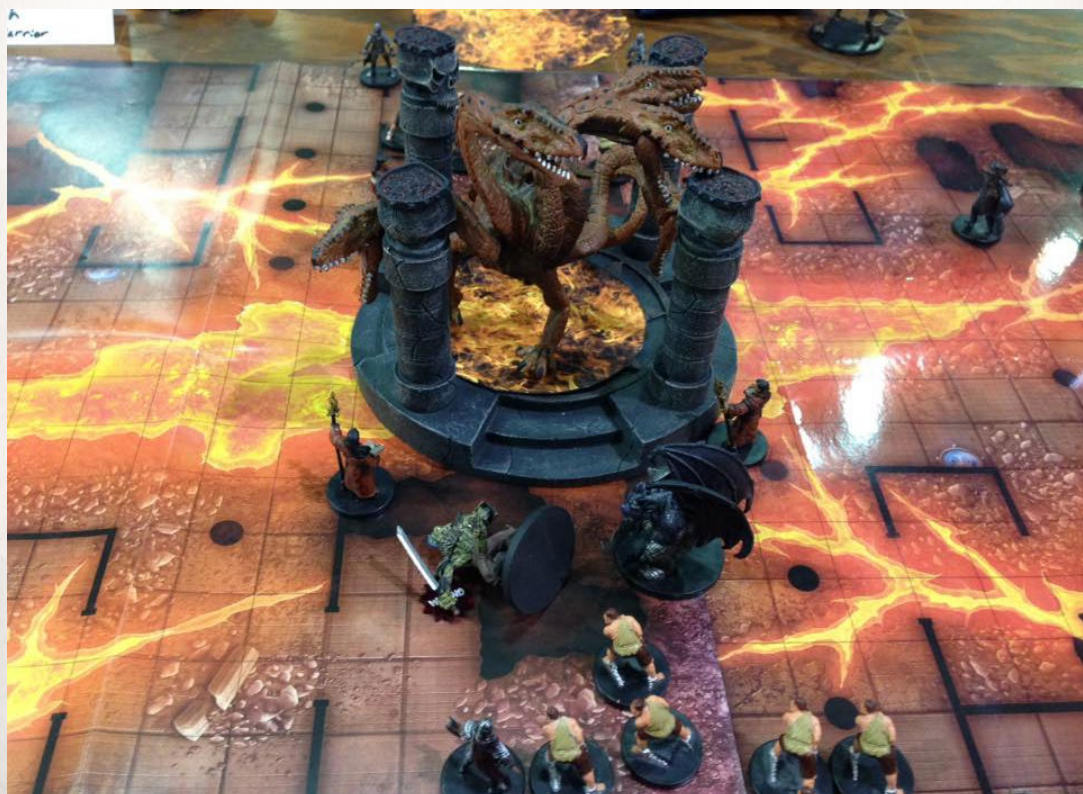
THE NAME

A good name can really help you nail down the theme. *The Last Parsec*, for example, is about exploring the deepest, furthest reaches of space in the far future. *Deadlands* is a horror Western. You can just guess what *Hell on Earth* is all about.

Coming up with a good and descriptive name for your game helps everyone instantly realize just what kind of setting it is. It's also an important part of branding, which will become critical if you decide to share your world outside of your friends.

GENRE

Genre is a short-hand way of framing certain parameters for you and your friends. If someone says they're running a *Savage Worlds* "hard scifi" campaign, for example, you have a starting point for discussion. Of course there's a lot more to know, but you know it's *not* going to feature *Flash Gordon*® or *Buck*



Rogers® style space opera, for example. It's also a fairly sure bet it takes place in a futuristic environment and there's likely to be space-travel.

Don't let the concept of genre set limits on your creativity, but do use it to help describe it. If you want to run a low-magic campaign based on the *Conan*™ books by Robert E. Howard, for example, you might want to call it "swords and sorcery" to differentiate it from lighter, "high magic" genres like *Lord of the Rings*™ or most *Dungeons & Dragons*™ settings.

The benefits of understanding your genre are more practical than theoretical. In the context of *Savage Worlds*, for example, it helps figure out which Setting Rules or Companions might be useful to you in creating the world, and your friends when making characters.

If you eventually publish your setting, you'll often have to select a genre when you sell it. This is yet another short-hand way for those interested in your world to get the very basics of what it's about. On a site like DriveThruRPG, for example, you'll have to mark it as Fantasy, Supers, Horror, etc.

MIXING GENRES

Mixing genres can often yield fantastic results. *Deadlands*, which blends the Western and horror themes, is a great example. The old Saturday morning cartoon *Thundarr the Barbarian*™ is a favorite among gamers, and is a mashup of comic book-style science fiction and fantasy. *Shadowrun*™ puts typical fantasy races into dystopian cyberpunk.

You can also imagine properties you already love in a different genre. What about giant robots in a fantasy world? Or *Lord of the Rings* reskinned as crime noir?

The only limit on what you can do is your imagination!

THE WORLD

Now it's time to design the world itself. Start with the area you expect the heroes to adventure in most of the time. If there's a city that serves as their home base, describe it in a paragraph or two. Is it a shining example of law and order? Or is it a wretched hive of scum and villainy? Now think about some of the surrounding areas. Are the "Mountains of Dread" just a few miles away? Or are such places relatively far away from the centers of population?

THE MAP

This is a great time to sketch out your world or area map. There are lots of great resources to help with it these days even if you aren't particularly artistic, including map "painting" programs and with premade maps you can customize as you see fit.

And don't be afraid to do a little research as you create your world. Look up the basics on how mountains form, which direction rivers run, or where jungles grow. It can be fascinating and educational, and more importantly for your game will give you a more realistic foundation for your *fantastic* locations.

Best of all, once you make your map it will talk back to you. Imagine you add a desert and the name "The Last Desert" comes to you. Now it needs some history! Is it really the "last" desert? How did it get that name? Who lives there, and how? What are their customs? Do they share any habits or legends derived from desert-dwellers from the real world?

Your players might also create places as they make their characters. Maybe Emily wants her heroine to be from "The Blind Sea," because she thinks that sounds cool. You can work with her to figure out what that means and where it fits on the map.

THE ELEVATOR PITCH

There's a term used in Hollywood called "the Elevator Pitch." The idea is that you're a hungry screenwriter trying to pitch a movie idea to an executive. You can't get in to see him, but one day he's in the elevator and you have about 30 seconds to make him understand your idea, why it's cool, and why he'd want to make it.

The idea of the elevator pitch is strong for your campaign as well. If it takes many minutes to explain what the game is about to your potential players, it's too much. You can certainly do all the things you've talked about or have them as part of your backstory, but they need to be revealed during play as they're important to the characters.

If your game can be summed up succinctly, the players will get it quickly as well. You'll also know very quickly if they're excited about it and they can ask you for the details they're particularly interested in.

Here are the elevator pitches for some of Pinnacle's games:

- **DEADLANDS:** Weird Western horror where heroes are sometimes so tough they come back from the dead.
- **50 FATHOMS:** A fantastic and colorful world is drowning from a witch's curse. Heroes from that world and our own earth must travel the seas to stop the flooding and defeat the witches.
- **NECESSARY EVIL:** When all the super-heroes are gone, the only ones left to save the world from an evil alien invasion are the supervillains!
- **WEIRD WARS:** The violence of war gives rise to dark things. Soldiers, sailors, and airmen of every nation must battle their enemies as well as the horrible things that form in the shadows.

THE HEROES

Which brings us to those characters. Once you've identified what your world is all about, you can figure out who the heroes are. A great way to do this is with archetypes, pregenerated characters ready for your friends to print and play.

Archetypes aren't just shortcuts for players to create characters, they're also the iconic or signature character types of their world. A gothic world of Victorian horror should probably feature witch hunters, for example, and rocket rangers might be ubiquitous in a pulp sci-fi game.

RACES

Make sure you know the core races of your world, too. Is everyone human or are there other races? You can use those in the core rules, alter them, or make your own with the list of racial abilities.

Make sure you consider balance if you make your own. A race of super-intelligent titans are simply going to be more powerful in game terms than humans. That's fine if everyone is playing a titan, but if they're not, you have to find a way to make humans comparable or those who play them may feel overshadowed (literally!) and frustrated.

Don't be afraid to alter the standard +2 points in advantages, either. Perhaps the player characters are all demi-gods and have +4 or even +6 points worth of racial abilities. Or maybe they're rabbits or rats in a sentient animal setting with -2 points or more of abilities. Both campaigns could be extremely interesting and are fully supported by the same rules.

NEW EDGES & HINDRANCES

The last step you should take is creating new powers, Edges, and Hindrances. For the most part, we've found you really want to keep the selection to less than a dozen powers, and half that number of new Edges or Hindrances. A lot of new

Game Masters go crazy creating scores of each, but most players take what's already covered in *Savage Worlds*. That's not to say you shouldn't have some new signature powers, Edges, or Hindrances that represent the tropes of your world — just that you should think them through very carefully, and add them mostly for flavor or to cover some very unique feature of the setting the core rules don't.

You might want to look at Professional Edges first as they're often used to create archetypal characters of a world. A *Savage Worlds* character with the Woodsman Edge, for example, is a "ranger" in most swords and sorcery games.

If there's a particular character type common to your world, this is the way to encourage your group to play them. Let's say you're creating a far-future *Matrix*TM-type world infested with vampires. You want to create one or more Professional Edges for vampire hunters. You could start with something useful but fairly low-powered, let's call it Hunter. These are characters who know the vampires exist and have fought them before. Maybe their special ability is that they never make Fear checks when confronted by vampires. To reflect the fact that they've had to face them before, you set the requirement as Novice, Fighting d8+, and Spirit of d8+.

Maybe later on, you create Vampire Hunter. They've learned how to stake the bloodsuckers in the heart, and halve penalties for Called Shots to the heart. Maybe an improved version negates the penalty altogether.

If there's a cardinal rule to Edges, it's that you don't want to grant flat bonuses to combat or arcane skills. It's okay if they only apply in certain situations, but don't give gunslingers +2 to Shooting or martial artists +1 to Fighting and Parry all the time. You'll really throw off the scale of the game if you do that, particularly as they reach higher Ranks.

You can give flat bonuses to noncombat skills, but be careful not to let them stack. If you do, you'll find a dancer using her bonus-heavy Performance skill to constantly Support her allies and Test her foes.

Most importantly, don't feel you need a ton of new Edges & Hindrances. The core rules cover a lot. What you're looking for are a few concepts iconic to the world or that enable a particular character archetype to function as she might in fiction or movies.

Finally, it's not a good idea to go scouring every other book we've done and import all their Edges & Hindrances into your world — it's unnecessary and overwhelming to most players, and dilutes what's special about *your* game.



ICONIC ADVENTURES

Perhaps the single strongest thing you can think of for your new world is what you expect a typical adventure to be about. If it's a fantasy "dungeon crawler," you expect the heroes to delve into multi-leveled dungeons fighting monsters and gathering treasure. If it's an anti-corporate cyberpunk setting, you expect the team to run missions against secure buildings and battle in cyberspace.

This doesn't mean all your adventures need to follow this pattern, but if you set this as a baseline expectation players will quickly understand the world, what it's about, and most importantly, their role in it. This tells a player what kind of character is appropriate for that world as well.

SCRIPTED ADVENTURES

Scripted adventures are much like interactive stories. The players can make choices along the way but the overall plot advances more or less intact regardless of what they do. Epic tales must sometimes follow this path — it's hard to tell a story if you don't know what chapters are to come.

When running a scripted adventure, try not to make your scenarios *feel* like they're scripted. The group should never feel like they're being "railroaded," stuck on the track no matter what they do. Instead, use the situation, overwhelming opponents, or "down time" to give the group the feeling they control the story more than they actually do.

SITUATIONAL ADVENTURES

Situational adventures are much easier to run if you're able to think on your feet. You present a situation of some sort and then just let the heroes deal with it however they choose. Say an evil necromancer has created an army of undead to destroy the living. What do the heroes do about it?

Do they hire on with the local militia? Do they try and sneak into the cursed lands to strike down the necromancer? Do they raise and lead an army of their own against him? Or are they rogues trying to escape?

You need to prepare a few locations, Extras, and planned encounters for situational adventures. You don't want to have to figure out what the lich's lair looks like on the fly, for example, and you'll want a few interesting encounters to push things along or fill in the gaps.

SANDBOX ADVENTURES

Another fun way to play is to let your players choose where they go. You might create a map of the area with different geographic features and rumors associated with them, for example. Or you can simply list quests, tasks, or jobs that local authorities, guilds, people, or other "quest givers" have available.

This can be particularly fun for the players as they get to choose what *they're* interested in. They can even decide to go on personal quests to resolve their own backstories and subplots instead, perhaps bringing the rest of the party along for the ride.

The trick with sandbox campaigns and adventures is that it can sometimes feel overly spontaneous. We've found it's best if there's a larger, over-arching story or threat that will eventually impact the heroes (read the **Plot Point Campaigns** section starting on page 11 to see how we handle this concept).

VILLAINS & MONSTERS

Defining your adventures will also help you identify the heroes' *foes*. Are there actual monsters in the world, or are the antagonists all humans or other sorts of villains?

Consider their motivations as well. Post-apocalyptic zombies may just be out

for brains, but who created them? And why? Medusa probably isn't just sitting in her lair waiting for heroes to turn to stone. She wants something. What is it? Is there a way to bargain with her instead of killing her?

Even in a typical fantasy game with "wandering monsters," you can add great verisimilitude to your world by putting your monsters in realistic circumstances. Simplistic creatures want food, mates, and shelter, and strive to protect their young. Leave them alone and they might leave you alone — unless the party looks like a walking meal.

You can also reveal details about your world through your encounters. Maybe the local wolves don't normally attack, but the necromancer's servants have decimated the wildlife and forced the starving wolves to attack the local village.

LESS IS MORE

Now that you have your theme and your mechanics are in place, it's time to go back and get rid of the stuff that doesn't fit or isn't needed.

Does your fantasy setting really need elves and dwarves? Or did you include them because every fantasy setting since *The Hobbit*™ has them? Would anything be lost by their removal? Could something else take their place?

Do you really need those extensive computer rules in a sci-fi setting? *Star Trek*™ might need extensive computer rules — *Star Wars*™ does not. Even then, Computers, Electronics, and Hacking probably does everything you need. And you can always use Dramatic Taks on those occasions when you want things to be a challenge.

THE ENEMY

Some villains are just evil, destructive, greedy, or set on vengeance for some real or perceived wrong. Others have well thought-out goals and motivations. They likely even believe *they're* the heroes; or at least are doing villainous things for some greater good.

As you craft the opposition for your tale, think about what they want and how they plan to get there. Why does the evil necromancer want a world full of zombies? Does he hate the living for some terrible incident in his past? What about the international jewel thief? Is she just greedy, or is she actually out to prove she's the greatest of all time?

Understanding your villains not only makes them more interesting, it helps you figure out what kinds of adventures you plan on sending your heroes on; or how their own personal agendas might cross paths with your villains.

Consider a dragon terrorizing a small kingdom in a fantasy realm. The adventurers are asked to slay it by the local baron. As they investigate the incident, they realize it's the chain of explorers trying to steal the dragon's priceless eggs that have disturbed it. *Now* what do they do? The creature is just trying to protect its young, the local villagers have nothing to do with it, but the value of the eggs attracts other warbands and adventurers of all types to the kingdom. What starts as a simple monster hunt then becomes a complex political tale with depth and intrigue.

That's great *if* that's what you want. If you actually just want a monster hunt, that's okay, too! Then maybe the dragon is a force of destruction and chaos that must be stopped. Either way, understanding its nature helps you structure your entire campaign.

PLOT POINT BOOK FORMAT

In general, Plot Point books follow a certain format:

Introduction: Geared for both players and GMs. This section tells you what the world is all about, what the big backstory is, and who the adventurers typically are. Maybe a quick overview of the world goes here as well.

Characters: Any special rules for making characters, gear, or new Edges and Hindrances.

Setting Rules: Any new rules the particular setting needs, like rules for super powered heroes in *Necessary Evil*, or ship-to-ship combat in *50 Fathoms*.

GM'S SECTION

The rest of the book is purely for the Game Master. Here's how it usually breaks down:

Gazetteer: A list of locations the group will travel to and the things they'll see there. Locations should be keyed to Savage Tales to help the GM run adventures on the fly.

Savage Tales: Dozens of adventures ranging from fully-fleshed out tales to short encounters. The first few Savage Tales should be your "Plot Point" adventures. These occur intermittently through the campaign as the timeline advances and the backstory progresses. It should be very clear to the GM when these are to be run, such as "When the first hero in the group reaches Heroic Rank."

Bestiary: A complete list of all the creatures and common NPCs (such as guards or bandits) the players will encounter.

CONVERTED SETTINGS

There are literally thousands of great roleplaying settings out there made by other companies besides Pinnacle. We're fans of many of these brilliant worlds as well. If you want to play in those settings with the *Savage Worlds* rules, here are some tips that might help.

Don't reinvent the wheel. *Savage Worlds* was designed for quick play with minimal rule interference. All too often conversions of other games try to account for every element — massive skill lists, minute details, and hundreds of powers. This isn't *Savage Worlds* and bringing in those elements will burden the rules to the point where the game is no longer fast, furious, or fun.

Like an original setting, identify the themes of the other game and try to adapt them with a few key Setting Rules. Literal translations of game mechanics from other systems often result in cumbersome sub-systems that aren't fun in the *Savage Worlds* version.

There is often a strong desire to create lots of new skills, Edges, and powers to fit your setting. That's understandable, but it isn't always the best path. More skills also means players have to either dedicate precious skill points to them, or you have to give out more skill points which they can then put into their combat skills instead.

Some GMs decide they want more realism. Creating a list of many different firearm skills, for example, might be more realistic, but the system wasn't designed that way and it becomes a major burden to the players. Consider the more simple **Familiarization** or **Specialization** rules in *Savage Worlds* instead. They give the same effect without drastically changing skill lists, skill points, and overall balance.

Remember too that a lot of what you're looking for might already be in the rules. Do you need a sniper Edge? That's Marksman. Do you need a Mechanic skill? Why not use Repair? Do you need a magic missile power? That's *bolt*.

Finally, when converting monsters and Extras, compare them to existing creatures in the core rules or official supplements. You can likely find what you're looking for there.

PLOT POINT CAMPAIGNS

Plot Points are how most of our *Savage Settings* are constructed. The idea is to communicate a big backstory — like the flooding of the world in *50 Fathoms* — but still give GMs the freedom to construct and run their own stories in the foreground. The other goal is to allow the GM to open the book and run an adventure almost instantly.

For example, you may have a character in your *50 Fathoms* group who's the daughter of Captain Kidd. Kyla Kidd has crossed over into the fantastic world of Caribdis to find her lost father (and his treasure!). The big backstory is about gathering certain information and artifacts to stop the world from being completely submerged in water — which will eventually destroy all the air-breathing species.

Certain adventures — called Plot Points — reveal this information to the heroes and help them gather the things they'll need to save the world. But the player's primary motivation is still to find her father. Think of these like television shows that have an "A" story and a "B" story. Which is which depends on you and how you want to run things, but the backstory is there to provide context, nonplayer character motivations, and fantastic locations.

The real goal behind all this is to help Game Masters who don't have tons of time to prepare their own game. In *50 Fathoms*, for example, a GM can start the overall campaign, figure out where the players are going, and read a short summary of that location. Then he can look at the points of interest at that site and see if there are any *Savage Tales* — short adventures — that his party might want to get involved with.

Think of a Plot Point setting as a quick pick-up instruction manual for actually running a game session (almost) on the fly. The location descriptions are intended to quickly hone in on how the GM describes the area to his players, the plots — via *Savage Tales* — have enough detail to run a night's session, and the adversaries or challenges are defined and stated — either as unique villains or by reference to the bestiary.

EXAMPLE

Here's an example from our story of Kyla Kidd above:

Kyla Kidd has heard her missing father visited the Kehana Flumes, a series of chimneys in the Flotsam Seas that spew smoke and flame — and occasionally belch precious metals as well. The GM quickly looks up the Kehana Flumes and finds out what they're all about. This is a short section so he can do this minutes before the game starts if he likes.

Under the Kehana Flumes are some random encounters that can occur there, as well as a *Savage Tale* called Kehana Dissenter. That sends the GM to a *Savage Tale* wherein a savage fish-man — normally an enemy of surface-dwellers — offers to join the crew. The GM decides to flesh this out a bit more and decides the kehana — Stripe — will show the heroes where a load of precious metals is if they'll help him wipe out his sworn enemy, a brutal Kehana and a small group of bloodthirsty sycophants.

BACKSTORIES AND PLOT POINTS

Thinking up a backstory is pretty easy, but the real trick is encouraging players to interact with it while still pursuing their own personal goals. As a rule, you want to create a Plot Point campaign that sends players all over the “map” (whether that’s literal or figuratively). This way they’ll visit your locations and can interact with the Savage Tales you’ve set there.

The tried-and-true method is to require the heroes to seek out information or items from all over the map. Maybe it’s like most computer games and they’re gathering a magical artifact that will help them defeat the Evil Overlord. Or maybe they have to travel throughout a ruined wasteland performing tasks for various tribes so they can unite them against a common foe.

Regardless of the actual story, the point is to have your heroes scouring your campaign area or world looking for trouble.

PLOT POINT CAMPAIGN FORMAT

—by Matthew Cutter,
Deadlands Brand Manager

The best Plot Point Campaigns (PPC) maintain the overall story in a compelling way, at the same time making few or even no assumptions about who the characters are, or when each episode is to be played.

BEGINNING

First explain the backstory — everything that led up to the PPC — succinctly. Then provide an overall summary of the PPC, with each episode getting roughly 1 or 2 paragraphs.

Episode One: Provides an opening scene that achieves two goals:

- Assemble the characters at one location iconic to the setting or linked in some way to the overall Plot Point — preferably both! Everyone gets a turn to describe his or her character’s manner and appearance.
- Give the characters a chance to work together against some token challenge and make a few Trait rolls. (Go on to another scene or two after that.)

MIDDLE

In general, include as much “narrative space” as possible between episodes, unless it’s impossible to do so and maintain the storyline.

Consider established narrative conventions when you plot your story:

- Introduction
- Establish Conflict
- Rising Action
- Problem/Nadir
- Climax
- Denouement (usually short or nonexistent in RPGs).

Episodes: Each episode should:

- Advance the overall Plot Point’s story in a significant way, and let the characters learn something new (about the plot, their foes, etc.)
- Incorporate some new, unusual, or unfamiliar terrain or location (or go the other way with a location iconic to the setting).
- Include a variety of Trait tests to appeal to a range of character types. Go beyond combat — although we recommend at least one fight per episode — and include social interactions, research, survival, Dramatic Tasks, Social Conflicts, Chases, etc.
- Include a combat scene...unless there’s a good reason not to! And not all potential combats need end in bloodshed. In a combat-focused episode, typically two combat scenes and a “boss” battle should be the maximum.



- Include a map for the GM of any important locale(s)
- End with the players knowing where to go and what to do next...unless the players not knowing what's next is narratively important. If not, spill the beans.

END

The Plot Point's final episode should focus on the group's epic showdown against the main antagonist and his/her/its allies. If the Plot Point featured any mysteries, all should now be revealed; all loose ends are tied. The final "battle" need not be violent — it could be a debate using Social Conflicts or a difficult Dramatic Task — but when it is violent, it should be a set-piece battle in a novel environment.

*"YOU FIND YOURSELF IN A
STRANGE NEW LAND...."*

—THE GM

FINAL NOTES

At all times, remember to keep it "FFF" — or Fast, Furious, and Fun! Have fun creating your world as well!

The *Savage Worlds* community has been blessed with some of the best and most creative fans and Game Masters in the adventure gaming hobby. We *highly* encourage you to check out a convention where the game is being run. If no one at the local convention or game store is running *Savage Worlds*, maybe you could give it a try. Either way you're likely to meet wonderful new people who like the same things you do. Maybe they'll be occasional friends you run into at future shows or events, or maybe they'll be the kind of lifelong gaming buddies we see time and time again throughout the incredible *Savage Worlds* community.

We hope you enjoy creating worlds, running or playing the game, and socializing with your friends, and we hope to meet you at a show or game store some day to hear all about your wild adventures!

THE PINNACLE STYLE GUIDE

Pinnacle maintains a full Style Guide you can find on our website. It tells you what terms are capitalized, grammatical choices we make like serial commas, how to set up templates if you're submitting work to us, example profiles and weapon tables, and much more.

These are our choices. You can make your own, but the closer you stick to these the more familiar your world will be to your friends and fans.

Here are a few we feel are the most important.

TONE

Pinnacle keeps things PG-13. We don't do graphic sex or violence. We also don't glorify smoking, and in general try to avoid it all together (yes, even in *Deadlands Noir*). Harming or killing children is also something we tend to avoid. There are exceptions to every rule, but if it's not critical to your story, please adhere to our rules.

REFERRING TO CHARACTERS

We don't use the term "PCs" or "NPCs." If it's important to distinguish between the two, spell them out.

Readers get tired of the same pronouns over and over, so try to add variety to your references. Player characters can be referred to as "the party," "adventurers," "team," "heroes," "investigators," and so on. Certain settings have additional options, such as "gumshoes" for *Deadlands Noir*, "wanderers" for *Solomon Kane*, "posse" for *Deadlands: The Weird West*, or "students" for *East Texas University*.

You can also use situational pronouns. For example, if the group is entering a strange new land, you could call them "strangers," "invaders," "explorers," or "interlopers" on occasion.

USING YOU: CHARACTERS AND PLAYERS

There are only two ways "you" is appropriate:

- When we're actually talking to you the reader, as in, "You roll the dice."
- When it's colloquial, as in, "You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs, partner!"

Keep the difference between players and characters clear. Players roll dice. Characters *or* players can make Trait checks. Characters have Edges and Hindrances.

Edges and Hindrances are where this pops up the most — but watch for "you" throughout.

ACTIVE VOICE, NOT PASSIVE

Use an active voice to make your writing more vibrant and exciting to read. A passive voice is less direct, sounds hesitant, and makes it difficult for the reader to determine who's doing something. When used sparingly it can be effective, but when overused it causes writing to drag.

Here's a handy device to help recognize passive voice: If you need to insert "by zombies" at the end to understand who's taking the action, the sentence is probably passive.

Here are a few examples of passive voice:

"The newspapers are delivered." (by zombies?)

"The car is driven." (by zombies?)

"The brains are eaten." (by zombies!)

Here are the same examples, but written in an active voice:

"Billy delivers the newspapers."

"My mother drives the car."

"Zombies eat the brains."

SAVAGE WORLDS FOR ALL AGES

—BY JODI BLACK

With geek culture more normal than ever, and “actual play” RPG videos available online, more people want to play than ever before. We say, “Welcome!”

This chapter is a resource for all ends of the life spectrum: from younger minds joining parents and friends at the “big kid” gaming table to those looking to pick up a new hobby in retirement. Jodi Black — gamer, mom, middle school game club starter, and COO for Pinnacle — offers up tips to engage new players from the very young to the very... mature. You’ll find tweaks to the *Savage Worlds* core rules, sample plots and pacing techniques, facilitating game play, and finally how to empower them to run their own games.

UNIVERSAL ADVICE

Very few new gamers come to the hobby without limitation. Whether it’s a demanding class or work schedule, or physical/cognitive restriction, the person initiating the game can face challenges. This section proposes general information applicable to all ages.

About our age ranges: You can borrow from other ages. Your four year old may be ready for some of the tips offered in the Young Readers, or your Adult friend

who is still in Higher Education (or acts like it).

PATIENCE IS YOUR FRIEND

The kindest thing you can do for yourself, as the person trying to encourage others to play *Savage Worlds* (or any game), is to recognize that others are not trying to hurt your feelings when they put up barriers to game play. Schedules are difficult, obligations war with priorities, abilities change. If the first proposal falls flat, evaluate whether to try again. We hope relationships are built by gaming, not stressed by it.

ALL ARE WELCOME

While player age is the main focus of this chapter, we hope all new players find a welcoming environment regardless of their physical or cognitive limitations, age, race, culture, gender or gender identity, socioeconomic status, or other “backstory” details. These details are what make our characters more interesting. Please consider embracing diversity at your game table too!

GAMING WINS OVER GAME MECHANICS

As much work as we’ve put into *Savage Worlds* to make it the best system for playing tabletop roleplaying games, there



are times when the Game Master must make a gut call. The best way I know how to say it is this: Trust Yourself. Decide whatever improvised game mechanic feels right at the time and move on. If the situation happens again, you can always make a different decision.

YOUNG READERS

Ages 6–11, elementary school

Once a child can read simple words, game play options open! They can usually sit still and focus on a game for at least half an hour.

It's important that children in this age range are encouraged to use their imaginations. They are particularly sensitive to what the "right" answer is, even when there are few right or wrong answers.

If you want to play with children in this age range, you must include their parent/guardian in the planning process and invite them to observe game play.

Discover their comfort level with violence, combat, or religious topics.

GAME PREP

Stock the game table with pencils, dice, and a map for sketching out tactical combat. Consider keeping all dice of the same kind one color (go nuts on the Wild Dice, though!). For example, if they have Shooting at a d8, you might tell them "Make a Shooting roll. That's a d8 — purple — and don't forget your Wild Die. Remember, look for Aces!"

Tips for Encouraging Players:

- Make trips to museums. Having a book about the location they just visited is a great alternative to photographs, and a resource for games in that era or culture.
- Buy them a copy of *Savage Worlds* core rules and a journal. If they create pages and pages of characters they never plan to play, that's a good sign the child is ready to Game Master!

- Make sure they see YOU reading on your own from physical media. They usually can't tell the difference between fiction on an electronic device and a game.
- They should also see you playing games they are not allowed to play yet. Young children are motivated to accomplish "big kid" tasks, and by setting this apart they not only witness how adults behave while gaming but they work toward that standard. Keeping your growing gamer in the room means negotiating with older players. Be sensitive to your friends' requests, and perhaps limit the time the child may be in the room.

GAME MASTERING

Game Masters for this age group should focus on essentials of play. Allow for one hour of game play to start. Let the restlessness of your players guide you for when to call for a break.

Start as simply as possible. For example, pregenerated Novice characters with

exactly the same stats for skills, but with different Edges and Hindrances, makes it easier to remember what dice everyone rolls. For younger players you may find better success with just one Edge and no Hindrance.

Focus on game mechanics for the first sessions: knowing when someone is talking "in game" or as themselves, making test rolls to figure out Acing, Target Numbers and Raises, and spending Bennies. Ignore details like Wild Cards, tactical map combat and ranges, and combat options until these concepts are played with and understood. The Quick Combat rules are very useful at this point to keep young minds interested.

To encourage your own child to play, look for opportunities when they are not distracted by electronics. For example, this could be during a walk, while driving in a car, or waiting for food to arrive at a restaurant. Narrative gaming is how bedtime stories work, try it! You can continue the tabletop game plot a scene



or two without dice rolls, or by guessing how likely they are to succeed.

Most Young Readers are not ready to take a leadership role as a Game Master. Instead, give them opportunities to make decisions for their character. By roleplaying decision making they'll become more confident in making real decisions for themselves and others.

Ask students with a good grasp of the game to roleplay Allies in combat. This gets them used to remembering to make separate rolls for their own character and the Ally, and tracking separate actions for each.

To ease a Young Reader further into the GM's seat, ask them to help you as a co-GM. The most common pitfall I've seen is they want "their" nonplayer characters to win! Help them to see the goal of the Game Master is to provide fun for everyone else.

HOUSE RULES

- **BENNIES FOR MANNERS:** Game Masters reward players for saying Please, Thank You, waiting their turn, and in general for facilitating game play. The emphasis on positive rewards makes it easier to ignore negative behavior—but look for the first opportunity to reward that child when positive behavior is shown!
- **SEATING ORDER INITIATIVE:** With very young children it usually makes more sense to go around the table instead of dealing cards. Players go first each round. As a quick rule, if most players can shuffle cards they get to use the Action Deck!
- **WIGGLE BREAKS:** Are your players restless? Get everyone up and move for a few minutes. Play a video and encourage dancing and singing. Run a lap around the house or the table. See who can balance on one foot the longest. Keep it short and focused, so you can get back into the game quickly.

- **SUGGESTED SETTING RULES:** Dumb Luck, Heroes Never Die, and/or Wound Cap: see core rules. Even though this age group is starting to play with the real rules of *Savage Worlds*, these Setting Rules reduce the chance of critical or deadly harm to the characters until the players learn to deal with setbacks in a more mature manner.

PLOTS

Finding a setting for a Young Reader is easy as they are so enthusiastic about a variety of media. The hard part is finding something the whole group wants to play. It's easier to present what the Game Master wants to prepare rather than try to come up with a group consensus.

A great resource for plots are fairy tales and mythology — anything simple and straightforward. Here's a noncombat plot: Aesop's Fable of the Ant and the Grasshopper could inspire two factions in a fantasy town who need convincing to work together. One group only wants to sleep and the other is busy tending the fields and bringing in the harvest. The ruling noble is worried about the sleepers and knows there will not be enough food for everyone over the winter because of it. The heroes learn a curse was cast on the town to make half of them lazy because of a comment the noble said to a disguised trickster god/goddess. They convince the noble to make amends, and the sleepers wake up.

AGE OF DISCOVERY

Ages 11–15, middle school or junior high

Students in this age range have usually conquered all the math, reading, and core social skills necessary for roleplaying games lasting at least 2 hours. They are exploring their newfound freedoms of thought and might challenge teachers and other adult role models' ways of thinking. They enjoy critical thinking activities and complex moral "what if"

scenarios, especially where they feel they are a real agent of change in their own lives.

This “age of discovery” can also represent changes from puberty, clashing with friends and family, and a struggle to determine identity. They are particularly sensitive to barriers to game play. It’s important for this age group to feel they belong in the game group as they sort out their place in the world and among their peers.

GAME PREP

There’s nothing different about setting the table for this age group from the Higher Education and Adult Learner age groups. They really can play the games, Rules As Written!

If electronics are allowed, try virtual tabletops to organize combat. Many students connect with tabletop gamers online later in the Higher Education age group, so this helps them stay connected to gaming later. I feel it’s more

JODI’S RULES FOR GAME CLUB

Before starting the Middle School Game Club, I realized the club usually would consist of myself, my daughters, and up to 30 other kids...with our faculty advisor helping as they could. The advising teacher approved these rules, and the students in Game Club voted to accept them at the first meeting. They might seem a little simplistic, but they worked to control the chaos!

Participation is an honor, not a right. Everyone belongs in Game Club but they have to follow the rest of the rules. Breaking these rules could mean dismissal from Game Club.

No electronics and no snacks. This means no cell phones, earbuds, game devices, etc. (Later we relaxed this rule to allow electronics one meeting a month, and we had a pizza party at the end of the year.)

All participants are ADULTS unless they prove otherwise. Adults choose games as part of a group, and make decisions cooperatively. Adults use polite language to communicate. Adults sit in their seats and play games.

If you’re not an adult, you’re a TODDLER and go in Time Out. Toddlers use foul language, run around the room, throw things, and have temper tantrums. Time Out lasts one minute per year of age with no distractions, no talking, and sitting still. If Time Out is broken the clock resets. (I usually had one or two test this rule at the beginning of the school year.)

Game Club elects student officers. A formal meeting was held for the last 15 minutes of the weekly club meetings, after all games were cleaned up. They decided how to fundraise (providing gaming during the school dances was a big hit), spent club money to buy games, and planned trips to nearby game conventions.

By the end of my third year with this club both my daughters had moved through to the high school and I handed the reins back to the teacher advisor. To my surprise, the school made Game Club part of their daytime curriculum! Students in Game Club had higher test scores and fewer office referrals for behavior. By moving it to the free period during the school day, afterschool accommodations were not a problem and more students were able to participate.

important at this age, however, to encourage face-to-face interaction for their social development.

Probably the best way to make time for gaming is to start a game club, working with existing organizations like a school, religious group, scouts, 4-H, or public use area like a library or game store. The hosting group usually has rules such as a mandatory background check for volunteers.

TIPS FOR ENCOURAGING PLAYERS:

If one or two students are not familiar with the setting, arrange a group movie night or make available reading material for everyone.

- Make a conscious effort to spend one-on-one time with the student. If you are not the student's parent, then simply take them aside in the same room as the parent/others for a chat. Actively listening is the best way to show you care about their creative and wacky ideas.
- Promote diversity and inclusivity in your gaming themes. Mix up the style of gaming offered from narrative to strategic and from large scale sieges to frivolous roleplaying situations. Even the heavy combat gamer likes a light hearted roleplaying opportunity now and then.
- Encourage students (with Bennies!) to write a backstory for their character. They can also send photos, or draw, things which remind them of their character.
- Also reward the player with an encyclopedic knowledge of the core rules. That player is ready to a Game Master!

GAME MASTERING

This is the amazing time when students usually have the "A ha!" moment for roleplaying games. They may not feel

they understand much of their world, but they get gaming!

They love to debate and show off their knowledge. Add riddles, logic problems, and other mental gymnastics to your scenarios. The discussion is the fun part (make sure everyone gets their say).

Game Masters probably want to steer clear of offering romantic intrigue. Most students this age are not interested, or have underdeveloped ideas of what a mature adult is like in a romantic relationship. Let your NPCs model healthy and unhealthy relationships to guide their learning.

Most students stepping into the Game Master role appreciate a co-GM helping them answer rules questions or to help set up the plot. Try to only step in when asked or when you think they're heading into trouble.

HOUSE RULES

- **BENNIES FOR MANNERS:** Because we always need to practice good manners. See above.
- **HIGHLIGHTS REEL:** After every session, ask players to jot down a few words on their character sheet about when their character helped or was important to the story. As the campaign continues it also serves as a plot summary.
- **SETTING RULES:** The Setting Rules Born a Hero, Creative Combat, Heroes Never Die, and/or High Adventure allow for more complexity in the game without all the gritty damage rolls which can lead to character death and make a student feel isolated.

PLOTS

Resources for plots for this age include Shakespeare's plays, famous novels, and popular movies. It's okay if the players recognize the plot, even disguised as a western or in space.

Another thing to consider for this age group is their love of strategy. This is

not always about combat, and hopefully you can tell when they are bored by “murder hobo” gaming. Challenge them with social (but probably not political) intrigue. And prepare to bring a healthy dose of tactical combat for the players who want to plan out a mega assault on the keep.

For example, here’s a plot roughly based on the television show *Leverage*: The heroes are asked to recover a superhero team’s souvenirs which were stolen from a museum. To get these items they must sneak in past multiple defenses (motion sensitive lights, locked doors, and guards) to reach the villain’s display room. While in the act of “recovering” the heroes learn the items will make them more powerful. Perhaps using the items is the only safe way to escape the last defense. When they’ve completed the mission, do they keep their word and hand over the powerful items to the museum, or keep them for themselves?

HIGHER EDUCATION

*Ages 15–25,
high school and college*

This is the transition period from youth to adulthood. They may try on different identities or new interests, which is one reason why game play is so important. They make decisions during this time with multi-year effects: romantic partners, education, leaving home or creating a new home life, and their chosen career.

They may have large blocks of unscheduled time where they can enjoy immersive game environments. If everyone in the game group can accommodate a 12 hour game beginning at midnight, go for it! We promise you, there are few other opportunities in life.

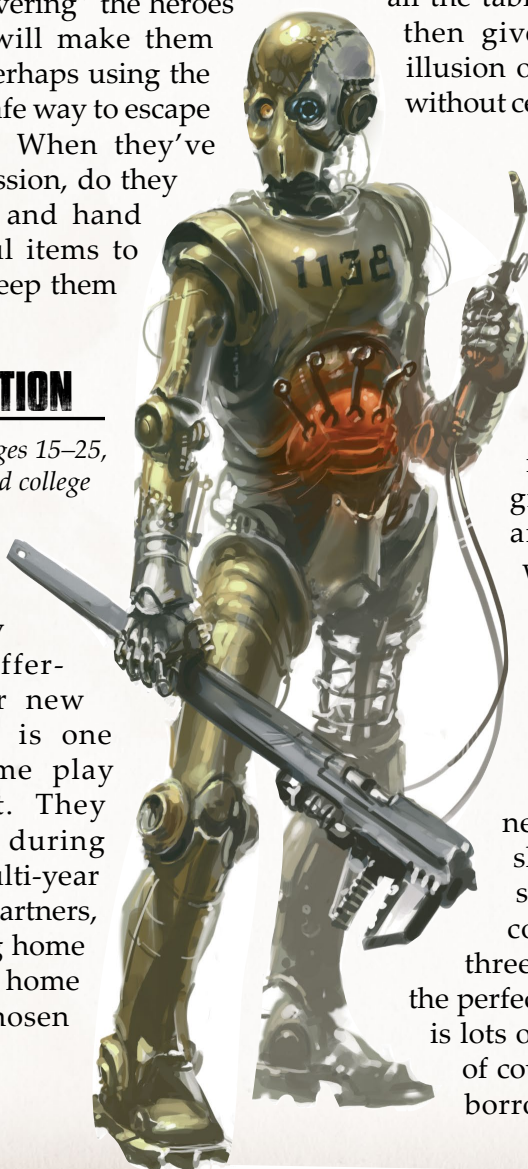
GAME PREP

Look for school organizations and search online for local tabletop groups and events. Most of these players are interested in board or video games, but it’s a start.

Students in this age range prefer having a semi-private area to play in. Provide all the tabletop gaming essentials then give them space (or the illusion of it). They want to talk without censoring themselves, nor worry about stopping the game to explain what’s happening to outsiders.

Most students in Higher Education play on virtual tabletops for privacy. They might also find it difficult to schedule group time together or arrange transportation, whereas they are accustomed to meeting online. If you want to bring them to the table, make sure there’s food and plan in advance.

To help encourage new gamers, offer to go shopping! Purchasing a special set of themed or colored dice (or two or three), game books, finding the perfect miniature — all of this is lots of fun. It’s not necessary, of course. All they need is to borrow some dice and use



some sort of token to represent themselves on a combat map. There are also tee shirts, mugs, stickers... plenty of companies stand ready to help you embrace your newly discovered geek side.

TIPS FOR ENCOURAGING PLAYERS:

- Buy gift cards to book stores to encourage the reading habits of students. And buy them game books.
- Engage them in conversation about games when you see them. Treat them like adults, because they are and that's what they want.
- Connect with the student online through their preferred method. Send links to game reviews, actual play videos, and GM tips from your favorite sources.

GAME MASTERING

If you are in this age group and others your age have asked you to Game Master, feel proud your leadership was recognized! In addition to figuring out what game to run for them, it's also usually up to you to coordinate schedules, find a gaming location, and ask your players to help with snacks and drinks. When they are smiling and laughing because someone said something funny, or their character pulled off some amazing dice roll, understand that it was impossible without you.

Students in Higher Education are usually eager to get involved in characters, story, and tackle deep themes in their games. It's an exciting time! With any luck, they'll make some rewarding memories to reflect on in their Golden Years.

Student Game Masters usually ask for adult help before or after the game, or even during a break in the game. If you are asked to help or even to play, please do! But watch for reactions from their peers, especially same age players. If they aren't talking it's because they feel self-conscious around an adult. That's your cue to leave.

HOUSE RULES

- **GM OF THE DAY:** Each game session, players dice off for the opportunity to be "GM of the Day." At the (actual) Game Master's discretion, the GM of the Day trades places with the Game Master for 10 minutes. Perhaps the Game Master wants to let the GM of the Day take over running combat, to describe the scene the players just walked into, or to add a "Yes, and..." plot twist to an interview or interrogation!
- **TRY IT OUT:** This age group loves to try out new rules and is not afraid of character death. Experiment with Setting Rules like *Born a Hero*, *Conviction*, *Creative Combat*, *Hard Choices*, or *High Adventure*. You might even consider *Gritty Damage* for a "welcome to the real world" twist.

PLOTS

What are some of the greatest stories ever told? Research epic fantasy novels like Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Martin's *Game of Thrones*TM, or even Adams' *Watership Down*TM. Historical fiction like *The Three Musketeers* or real periods of history like the Boxer Rebellion are also sources of intrigue and plots. The source of "epic" — poetry from Greece and Rome like Homer's *Odyssey* and Vergil's *Aeneid* — are also well-loved plots. And I know many a game was constructed around a ballad from the modern era.

The key elements are a cast of characters working toward a common goal, usually of life or death consequence. The heroes are tested and elevated over a long journey or quest, finally facing a rival/antagonist in a showdown (whether of wits or combat... but usually combat).

Don't rush the buildup on the epic campaign. The time passing outside the game is just as important as the time passing in game. Every step closer to the goal makes the players more excited and nervous. Let that final moment of

triumph hang; let them bask. Revered NPCs reward them.

ADULTS

Ages 25 to 65, working adults

People in this age range choose a career and family path, then may change both. They are typically caregivers for the other age groups. A career or health setback may mean they need help from others for the first time in their adult life. They begin to think about the legacy they someday leave behind.

This period is at times routine and boring for long stretches, or demanding and busy (this is the creators' demographic!). The primary purpose of game play at this age is stress relief. The most important milestone in this age of life for roleplaying is developing and strengthening relationships.

GAME PREP

Finding new players in this age range is a lot like dating! You'll find out about them through the same network of family, friends, coworkers, and other community groups you are already involved in.

Learning how to play a tabletop roleplaying game like *Savage Worlds* at this stage of life can feel very intimidating. Adults are more confident and don't require the same gaming privacy as those in Higher Education, but a venue with few distractions is appreciated. This is a classroom, and *Savage Worlds* is the course of study!

Have all the materials needed for a quick 20 minute demo game (just a combat, really), and use pregenerated characters. If you normally don't play with maps and miniatures, use them for the demo. Visual learners need to see their character in the imaginary space you describe.

Suggest placing phones in pockets, keep small children out of the room, and keep

side chatter to a minimum while you go over the character and game basics. Then play through the demo combat. Finally, relax the classroom atmosphere and "play a real game!" Keep it short.

The key to teaching an adult learner is repetition. As one of my professor friends put it: "Tell me. Now tell me what you think you told me. Now tell me again!"

TIPS FOR ENCOURAGING PLAYERS:

- Book club! Reading fiction makes it easier to read and comprehend game material, too. If you have a solid game group already, consider reading tie-in fiction together. For busy commuters, look for audiobooks they can listen to in the car.
- See a movie together. There's usually some movie with elements from your favorite genre. For example, gather to watch the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, or you can get a group together to go see the latest comic hero movie, then have dinner after. When a guest voices appreciation for a character, guide the topic of conversation to how they could be that character in a roleplaying game!

GAME MASTERING

Time is the biggest barrier to gaming at this age. Plan ahead three months or a year in advance to set the schedule! Having a routine on everyone's calendar means more people can keep their gaming commitments.

Adults are sometimes sensitive to criticism. Whereas at other ages failure is a normal part of learning, adults are on top of their game. They might especially get upset about being corrected when "it's just a game." As Game Master, keep your reminders gentle. Encourage your players and help build their confidence with the game mechanics and knowledge of the rules. It's this confidence which leads them to becoming Game Masters themselves!

HOUSE RULES

■ **SETTING RULES:** All! ...just not all of them at once. Pick and choose which fit the flavor of the game you are running. As a good rule of thumb, choose whatever makes game play the most rewarding and keeps the action going.

PLOTS

Adults rarely have the time to devote to a juicy campaign like the Higher Education students can, but if your group is able to commit to it, go for it! Most Game Masters choose a condensed campaign to gain much the same flavor in a shorter period of time.

Many adult GMs find exactly what they need in Pinnacle's settings with Plot Point Campaigns. Some of the most popular Plot Point Campaigns are found in *Deadlands*, *50 Fathoms*, *Necessary Evil*, *Weird Wars*, *Rippers*, and the various world books of *The Last Parsec*.

Experienced Game Masters can also convert adventures from other game systems to play with *Savage Worlds*. Sometimes when there's a new player in the group, revisiting a classic game scenario is a lot of fun. When they experience the fantasy worlds of your youth, you can let them in on the jokes you're probably still telling.

GOLDEN YEARS

Ages 65+, adults who have retired from working

Core milestones at this age of life are acceptance of internal goals and declining physical and cognitive health.

This may mean retirement as a reward for years of hard work and/or an internal struggle for reconciliation of goals not achieved. They may feel a drive to share their knowledge and skills. They may also feel more responsible for continuing traditions, giving back to society, and sharing the deeper meanings of life.

Storytelling — long before there were roleplaying games — was the wheelhouse of the mature and elderly stretching back to oral history. Those new to roleplaying games at this stage of life worry their mental or physical limitations keep them from succeeding. The reality is no one can better engage in story than people with their experiences.

GAME PREP

Many people dream their entire adult years of these golden years, and plan to take up new hobbies like piano, fishing — or roleplaying games! Unlike most hobbies, ours is played with little other than your mind.

Studies have shown that playing games, crafting, using a computer, and engaging in social activities were associated with decreased risk of Mild Cognitive Impairment, which is a precursor to Alzheimer's disease.

Reassure your Golden friend that you want them to join your group to have fun with you. The game itself takes second place to the group getting together. Their skills — as a host, manager, secretary, artist, crafter, etc. — are a valuable resource for everyone.



People in this age range are not traditionally tech savvy, so they might need help. If someone has a vision restriction, suggest an app to read their character sheet for them, or a bigger screen they can use to zoom in on the text. Also, if manual dexterity is a problem, there are apps for rolling dice. Finally, anyone can help these players in person, if they prefer. Many of the same tips which help the Young Reader will help a retired person learn the game.

TIPS FOR ENCOURAGING PLAYERS:

- Put a demo on the schedule anywhere you can: assisted living facilities, game store, community hall, religious life facility, YMCA/YWCA, etc. Set an attractive game table with maps and colorful figures, and see who shows up.
- Help a player with memory loss keep track of their character and the story. They usually have little trouble playing their character in the moment. Keep the character concept and build simple, and perhaps keep a running summary of events.

GAME MASTERING

For new learners in this age range, take a few tips from the Young Reader section. Use simple Novice characters and color-coded dice. Start with short game sessions and build endurance. Skip traditional combat in favor of Quick Combat and Combat Options until they are more comfortable with dice rolls, initiative, and roleplaying their character.

In general, let new players know you're going to "KISS and Tell!" Keep it Simple and Silly. And they'll have the opportunity to tell lots of stories to a willing audience. If reminiscing happens before or after game, enjoy it! You'll learn a few good stories and might have just what you need for the next game! If the stories start up in the middle of your heist game, however, let

the other player reactions guide you. If they're restless, remind them everyone would love to hear their story after the game's story has hit a pausing point.

The Game Master watches which character each player chooses and thinks about why that character appeals to them. People at this age are more deliberate in their choices. Did the player with limited mobility choose a rough fighter because they miss activity themselves, or is the choice because the fighter is romantically interesting to another character? Offer up opportunities in game for that fighter, both romantic and active. Or ask! People in their Golden Years value direct answers, and often respond directly, too.



HOUSE RULES

- **THIS REMINDS ME:** At the end of each game session, go around the table and allow each player to share a story they were reminded of during the game.

PLOTS

Veteran players in their Golden Years might yearn for a return to the epic campaigns of the Higher Education years, or new players might prefer the shorter story arcs of the Adults. Ask the group. See which Game Masters are available and what they are interested in preparing.

At the heart of every game is time shared with friends and a break from the everyday pattern of life. Focus on these elements most of all when Game Mastering for players in their Golden Years.

MULTIGENERATIONAL ADAPTATIONS

If you are preparing a game for a public space like a library, convention, or game store, you should expect players from different age ranges unless specified otherwise. The host location might have requirements you need to observe.

Your group might have a few players from different age ranges and looking for more. For each age range represented, try to find more players from the same age group using the recommendations above. Make sure everyone knows this game is actively recruiting players of all ages.

GAME PREP

The Interactive Multigenerational Table? Why not! If some players engage better with a character sheet on their electronic device than on paper, let them. Likewise, the GM can use a virtual tabletop to project a cool combat map, but each player uses a miniature they painted. Look for ways to blend pen & paper with apps and other digital resources.

Members should agree to ask permission from the group before bringing new tech to the table. If apps on phones are a distraction rather than adding to the game experience, the Game Master might need to have a private talk with the player (or players with their GM).

GAME MASTERING

The challenges of preparing a game suitable for all ages might seem daunting at first. As a general guide pick the median ability level and then adjust for player strengths. For example, if introducing *Savage Worlds* to a mix of players aged 7 to 14, but most are aged 10, start with Young Reader tips and ask the older students to help you co-GM.

One format suggestion is to start the game with a quick combat asking those with shorter attention spans to help roll dice, move miniatures, and deal cards. Once their attention has wandered off, players more interested in roleplaying can focus on intrigue and investigation. Try to end the scenario so combat is set up for the next game.

HOW DO YOU PLAY SAVAGE WORLDS?

I've had a lot of fun preparing for this chapter in the World Builder's Guide and can't wait to hear how you play our little game. This is, by no means, a complete guide for each stage of life. I look forward to hearing you report best practice techniques and Setting Rules/House Rules at conventions or online.

"WE HAVE A BIG GROUP TODAY. I'M GOING TO NEED SOME HELP WITH..."

-THE GM



RISKS & REVERSALS

—BY OWEN LEAN

We've all been there. Sitting at the table, stacking our dice, getting bored. We feel the same catching up with a show we used to like. Or what about that time a friend of ours asked us to read their novel and we struggle through chapters of exposition with nothing happening? Each situation has the same issue, and deep down inside — whether we know it or not — we are crying out the same thing:

WHERE IS THE RISK?

When stories get boring, it's because little is at stake, and without risk there is no story. As Human beings, we DEFINE our lives by stories. We consume them at an insane rate. Every game we play, book we read, or movie we watch. We think of our lives as a big story with us as the protagonist. Even when we sleep our brains tell us stories. And the stories worth telling are defined by the risks at the heart of it.

Think for a moment about your favorite gaming story. You know, that one you're always telling. Could be when your character did something incredible, could have been when a string of snake eyes ruined everything with hilarious consequences, or maybe that touching

moment when your character died to save everyone else. Think about the story, and ask yourself, what was at risk? It was that risk and the consequences of it that makes it so awesome. Nobody tells the story of how they passed a driving roll and got to their destination on time without complication. EVERYONE tells the story of how a daredevil action and a critical success one shotted the dragon.

WHAT IS RISK?

Risk is present whenever a value important to the characters is threatened. It is the essence of every conflict which drives storytelling. Now conflict doesn't mean combat, *Casablanca* (1942) has hardly any violence, yet it is full of risk and remains one of the greatest movies ever made. Risk occurs whenever our choices and the forces of chance may affect something we value, in role playing game terms — it's usually when we roll the dice.

It's easy to have risk in your game, simply have some random orcs jump your party as they're on the way to the next town and there is risk. But the risk of random encounters gets old, very fast. Think about the groan one often lets out playing a video game and just as you reach your destination, and the

screen swirls for yet ANOTHER random encounter. We all encounter risk in our day to day lives, and most of us don't get attacked by orcs more than once a month, at the very most.

When I pitched this very article to Pinnacle, it could have been rejected—and in that I risked embarrassment, frustration, and disappointment—not the greatest amount of risk I'll grant you, but what about when I proposed to my wife? The same values were at risk but on a MUCH larger scale, PLUS the added risk of souring the relationship. Depending on circumstances, and one's confidence in one's abilities, the amount of risk present in a situation can dramatically alter. When I pitched this article and proposed to my wife, I was reasonably confident of it all going well. When I first pitched an adventure to Pinnacle though, or the first time I asked my wife out, the risk felt significantly greater and resultantly those are the stories I'm more likely to rabbit on about at dinner parties.

RISK IN RPGS

But how, perchance, do we, the long suffering Games Masters bring these risks into our games? It, of course, comes down to our players and what matters to THEM. What will drive them to bring risk into their lives? Will a burning desire for revenge drive them to steal a boat, face insurmountable odds and potentially damn themselves like Jack Sparrow in *Pirates Of The Caribbean: Curse Of The Black Pearl*™? Will true love bring them to forsake their family, abandon their riches and throw themselves towards almost certain death like Rose in *Titanic*? Perhaps like Indiana Jones they will risk their lives time and again because they believe so strongly that artifact "belongs in a museum"!

What if, instead of getting jumped by a gang of random Orcs, our heroes run into the orcs already engaged in combat with another adventuring party. Not any adventuring party either, the ones that two sessions ago stole the king's



prized spaniel and blamed it on our heroes, landing them in no end of trouble. What do our heroes do now? Do they help their outnumbered rivals, or leave them to their fate? Let's say they do decide to help them, but just as they do, one of the orcs turns to the elven hero and in his father's voice "Stop son! It's a trick!". NOW things are interesting!

Not only do we want to present these risks to our heroes, but we want to find ways to ensure we keep testing where their limits are. At what point do the risks become too much for the characters? Where do they draw the line? In *Raiders of the Lost Ark*™ Indy risks every trap imaginable to retrieve the golden idol, but when his rival Belloq has him surrounded — he knows he needs to give it up. In *The Matrix* Neo won't risk shimmying across the building ledge to escape Agent Smith, but he happily risks punishment for 'every computer crime we have a law for' in order to protect Morpheus and discover the truth.

These limits are by no means static. As your heroes gain experience they push these boundaries back. Novice rank Neo won't walk on a building ledge, but Heroic rank Neo bungee jumps off a helicopter to catch Morpheus. This is why we must increase the risk as the campaign develops. Neo jumping off that chopper is a great moment because he's rolling his d10, Athletics at a -4 penalty. It's a HARD roll. He almost fails his Strength roll afterwards and drops Morpheus. Maybe he spent a Benny? At the end of *Die Hard*™, we have no interest in watching now Legendary rank John McClain roll his d10, Shooting with Rock And Roll to blow Gruber away with a fully loaded machine gun. We want to watch him on three wound penalties, multi action to



draw the pistol he's taped to his back, and use his last two bullets to nail called shots at -4 and save the day. Easy victories are empty. When we are pushed to our absolute limits and still prevail, legends are made at the table.

THE JOY OF REVERSALS

Even legends have to fail sometimes though — if they don't there isn't any risk. And without failure, we can't have success. Thus the reversal is born. A reversal is when the value at risk switches from positive to negative or visa versa. A great scene, a great adventure, and a great campaign are all made up of these switches, progressively getting larger until they reach a climax. Not unlike other things in life. In the scene with the orcs we just made above we already have several reversals. When the heroes are traveling to a town, there is little risk except maybe Fatigue. They come across a group of orcs attacking their rivals, depending on their choices the heroes'

HONOR, MORALITY, and desire for REVENGE are at risk. They choose to help — resulting in their HONOR and MORALITY being positively charged. Yet our heroes attack with CONFIDENCE that they are doing the right thing, they are now also risking INJURY and possibly their LIVES. But when the orc captain speaks, CONFIDENCE reverses and their HONOR and MORALITY are at risk again. What if it is all a trick and the orcs are really adventurers, and the adventurers (under the spell of the orc shaman) are really the orcs? What if our heroes slay the wrong people? What if our heroes hesitate, and in that moment, the illusion is dropped only for an orc to run his spear through the father's neck? Now we have a climactic reversal — a value very dear to one of the characters — namely his FATHER's life has a massive switch to negative. That's the kind of reversal to end an adventure on. Alternatively, maybe the heroes don't hesitate, maybe the mage sees through the illusion in time. They slay the real orcs, and the previously estranged family members are reconciled. It's still a dramatic reversal, and a great place to end the scene and the session.

REVERSALS IN ACTION

To illustrate how risk and reversals take place in a gaming session, let's take another look at the Idol scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* from the perspective of a *Savage Worlds* scene.

Indy and Satito arrive in the Idol room. Satito, having the Overconfident Hindrance, charges forward. Indy however passes his Notice roll and sees the traps on the floor. Negative reversal.

He succeeds on his Athletics roll to carefully cross the floor without setting off another trap. Positive reversal.

When he reaches the Idol he makes a Smarts roll (at an undisclosed penalty) to guess the weight of the idol and alters his sandbag accordingly. For a moment

it looks like he succeeded, but the GM reveals... failure! Negative reversal.

The temple starts to collapse. Indy passes his Athletics roll at -4 and runs past the traps without taking damage. Positive reversal.

Satito swings across the gap and asks Indy to throw him the Idol so he can throw Indy the whip and they can escape. But Satito betrays him and runs off with the treasure. Negative reversal.

With the temple collapsing and the door ahead shutting, Indy has no choice but to make an Athletics roll at -4 to jump the gap. He JUST succeeds and catches the ledge. Positive reversal.

But the door is still closing and his foothold gives out. Negative reversal

Indy grabs a vine and attempts an Athletics roll — he fails, the vine loosens and he drops — he spends a Benny, this time he succeeds and gets out just as the door closes. Positive reversal.

He turns around to come face to face with the horrific sight of Santito's impaled corpse. Negative reversal.

Indy passes his Fear check and picks up the idol. Positive reversal.

But wait. What's that noise? It's a ruddy great rolling boulder! DRAMATIC TASK! Negative reversal.

Indy passes five Athletics rolls (Yep, there are exactly five shots in the movie here) and escapes. Positive reversal

Only to come face to face with his Enemy (Minor), Dr. Belloq and 50 or so warriors. And they have The Drop. Big Negative reversal.

Indy goes for his gun, and the GM says "ARE YOU SURE?" so thinking better of it he hands it over along with the Idol. Belloq presents the idol and the warriors drop in worship. Seeing his chance, Indy makes a run for it. Positive reversal.

Belloq orders the warriors after him, and we enter a Chase. Negative Reversal.

Indy succeeds and spies the water plane. Positive reversal.

But the pilot hasn't noticed. He's too concerned with the fact that he's caught a fish! Negative reversal.

Indy points out there's a whole tribe on his back. The pilot makes a Notice roll at +2 starts the engine. Positive reversal.

Indy rolls his Athletics to swing on a limb onto the plane but fails his roll and falls short, and the warriors have arrived. They open fire! Negative reversal.

Successfully rolling his Athletics and no doubt spending a few Bennies on soak rolls, Indy makes it to the plane, and with a further Athletics roll climbs aboard safely. The plane departs for safety. Big Positive reversal.

Safely aboard the plane, Indy realizes he's trapped with the pilot's pet snake setting off his Phobia (Major), but thankfully he's not flying and won't have to make any more rolls... humorous negative reversal and SCENE.

GAMES VS MOVIES

Obviously, if you try and run every scene like Messers Lucas, Spielberg, Kasman and Kaufman did with the above sequence — your going to go mad before the third dice roll. Besides, time, budget and investment — there is one significant difference between the world of movies and role playing games. Players.

The players aren't going to follow your script, and why would they? If you're writing a script in the first place you're likely approaching this in completely the wrong manner. The fact the players have so much agency is in many ways our greatest advantage. You don't need to be sitting there, quietly panicking about how you're going to ensure there is a reversal every few seconds. You don't need to. Because, God bless them, the players and the ever fateful dice will do it for us most of the time. All

we need to do is create a suitably risky situation, and let the characters fly.

We as Game Masters have this glorious advantage. We don't HAVE to write our protagonists. We have a small group of people who are entirely dedicated to the portrayal and development of a single character each! FOR FREE! Do you know what the average producer would give for that? A lot more than 3 Bennies and an advancement! So, when you're in the midst of a scene, just enjoy it, and if you feel things are going too much in one direction for too long, throw a stone into the pool and watch the ripples send everything the other way.

FROM SCENES TO ADVENTURES

Let's take a step back and look at the adventure as a whole. An adventure, in general, takes up one or maybe two of your gaming sessions. They are the plot points, and Savage Tales you find in the settings books you buy. Sometimes very little is needed — The Ranchers Life from *Deadlands: The Flood* does it in less than half a page — just by sending two big attacks at the heroes and having sufficient downtime in between. Sometimes though, we want to stretch things out more, such as in my own Horror For The Holidays for East Texas University — which usually lasts between two to three sessions and has chases, a seance, research periods, and a Christmas meal.

In general, a good adventure follows a three act structure, each ending with a major reversal. Think of an episode of your favorite television show. Each has a beginning, a middle, and an end along this pattern. The episode might end with a cliffhanger, and may contain elements of the series meta-plot — but it still is a self contained story in and of itself. To illustrate this, I'm going to use a free one sheet adventure of my own. Pop on to Pinnacle's website and search for *The Taxidermist's Tail* and give it a quick read. I'll wait for you.

Done? Lovely. So hopefully, as you read that, you saw the three acts and three major reversals that define them. If not, don't worry, we're going to go through them now.

THE BEGINNING

If you've ever been frustrated about how the players are going off following their own paths and ignoring your beautifully crafted plot hooks, this is where the problem lies. The beginning of a story is about getting the heroes' attention. In a street performance, we call this part of the show "the build." It's the part where the performer lays out the big props, tells some jokes, and makes a bit of racket to create a circle of people around them. In our adventures, the beginning isn't necessarily the original hook. We have the luxury that if the heroes don't take the original bait you can get them on the track. The adventure really starts at the first reversal. Which is ironically, sometimes the end of the beginning. In *The*

Taxidermist's Tail, the set up is quite simply that the heroes discover that McShane is willing to pay a decent amount of money to bring some bandits to justice. How this happens though is left vague because each posse reacts to things differently. If they aren't interested in the money it doesn't matter—we can get them hooked in plenty of other ways. Maybe the gang that robbed McShane robs the posse in the night sometime. Or perhaps in a future adventure they end up investigating a cave and it turns out to be McShane's hideout. It doesn't matter. Things really get going when the posse enter the cave and find the gang are already dead, and the mounted wolf has vanished.

What you're essentially trying to do, is harness a powerful emotion in the heroes. In the case of *The Taxidermist's Tail*, that emotion is CURIOSITY. It's also Neo's curiosity that gets things going in *The Matrix*, but it's Luke's LOYALTY to Obi-Wan that sets his course in *The Empire Strikes Back*™. In *Pirates Of The Caribbean*:



Curse Of The Black Pearl it is the HEROISM of Will and Elizabeth, coupled with the GREED of Jack, and his ENEMY Barbosa, that takes us to the sea. And it's Wyatt Earp's HONOR that gets the guns firing in Tombstone.

I'm sure you've noticed the connection. They are all Hindrances in *Savage Worlds*. It's your heroes' Hindrances that you utilize time and time again in order to get your adventures going. Get to know your player's Hindrances. Write them down on a whopping great piece of paper and pin it to your notes if you have to. You can do it obviously or subtly, as the adventure suits. Your job isn't to railroad the players here. It's to present them with something interesting enough that the heroes CHOOSE to follow it. If they don't stress it, move on. Let them spend the session exploring around the town and chatting up the handsome stable owner if that's what they want. You'll have plenty of time to hook them into your adventure some other way. If done right though, you may not even have to have a hook at all really. Just the right description of a scene can be enough to get the adventurers motivated.

If you really want to see an incredible beginning, re-watch *The Terminator*™. Count the lines of dialog in the beginning of that film. In the first 19 scenes of that movie there are ten lines. TEN. That's it. Cameron's masterpiece tells almost the entire opening of that story in pictures. Yet you watch it riveted and despite no exposition or dialogue, you know exactly what's going on. What imagery will move your players to the stuff of legends? What will transform them, like Sarah Connor, from diner waitress into Goddess of Salvation?

THE MIDDLE

Now we have the heroes' attention, it's time to ramp up the drama. The middle section of the adventure is where you

build the energy that will be released in the finale. The finale may be the bit that everyone talks about for years, but without a good middle section, nobody will care. If we were writing a movie or a novel, this would be by far the hardest part, so many pages to fill, so many reversals to create. Luckily though, we're running a game, and a lot of the hard work will be done by the heroes.

In *The Taxidermist's Tale* the middle starts when the heroes discover the scene in the cave, and goes up until the battle with the stuffed coyotes in McShane's Menagerie. It ends with the second big reversal of the adventure, where the heroes discover about McShane's real relationship with Kenny, and Zeke Boone. You'll notice that the formula is reasonably simple: there's a combat, dialogue, a combat, exposition. In other words in terms of pace it oscillates between high and low.

Look back again at the scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* it has essential three changes of pace. The pace starts low until Indy takes the Idol. The pace becomes fast as Indy escapes the temple until he meets Belloq, where it becomes slow again for the banter between them. As soon as Indy gets free, its fast pace all the way to the plane. This is carefully managed. If Indy had come out of the temple, dropped the idol only for Belloq and the warriors to shoot at him until he ran for cover, it would be too much fast. We'd lose interest as the relentless pace takes over our thoughts of what happened to the Idol and who the hell is Belloq. Likewise, if you just hit the players with combat after combat, they are going to get bored very fast.

So we alternate, we give our players high pace, then we slow it down, but before that gets dull we up the pace again. That doesn't mean going to initiative all the time: Quick Encounters, Dramatic Tasks, and Chases can all bring the adrenaline when it's needed.

THE PAYOFF

All of this brings our heroes to the finale. It's the moment everything's been building up to — so better bring the big guns. The finale needs to be epic. It needs to be dramatic. And the grand majority of the time, it needs to be high pace. Often we do this with combat. But it could be done with social combat, a devastating event, or any other piece of high drama. Just so long as the risk is the highest it's been in the adventure, and most importantly, at the end of it, there has been a significant reversal. It should be noted, that at the point the heroes reach this point, they should know more or less what's going on! In terms of the adventure that is. They may still not know a lot in terms of the campaign, but they should feel satisfied that enough has been resolved when they leave the table. Consider the Harry Potter series. There is an overarching story that covers all seven books, but each story is wrapped up in and of itself. There are answers. There is closure.

In *The Taxidermist's Tail*, this is done in the simplest of ways. The finale is the combat in Zeke's hut against the taxidermist and his creations. The big reversal is that either Zeke or the heroes won't be troublin' the Weird West no more! Making a good finale for your heroes can be as simple as that — grab a handful of bad guys that pose a big enough threat and throw it at them. Remember though, the more interesting the risks you give them, the more exciting the finale is. Ideally give them something they aren't expecting during that final scene (Not a TWIST — we'll talk about that in a bit), a quick shock reversal that ups the stakes. When the heroes come to the finale of *The Taxidermist's Tail*, they are expecting combat. They are expecting more stuffed beasties. They are expecting Zeke. However: They probably aren't expecting Zeke to be the monster he is and NOBODY is expecting that ceiling. You know what your players really care about, you know what you can hit them with to make that final struggle really count!



THE CAMPAIGN

Structuring a campaign is pretty much exactly the same as structuring an adventure. Just bigger, and in a way, slower but the principles remain the same. In *Deadlands: The Flood* the first four plot points make up the beginning, until the heroes join the Explorers' Society. The middle lasts until the final plot point. The Flood itself is the finale.

Again, we need to ensure the risk is present, and we need to alternate the pace. At a campaign level we do so with a lighter touch. If the heroes have just gone through the wringer in tonight's adventure, maybe next week it's time for something more relaxing and funny. If it's been a few adventures since they were really challenged, it's time to drop a some epic plot on their heads.

In general, the finale of your campaign should be a single adventure. This is where you hit the heroes with everything you've got. The stakes need to be enormous. Heroes should have to bring everything they've got to triumph here. Death should definitely be in the cards, and there really should be a chance of failure. Don't make the odds impossible, but make sure the risk is big enough that they feel like true legends at the end of it.

Just like the finale of an adventure, the finale of the campaign should bring about an enormous reversal. Only this time, it should be world shattering. By the end of the campaign, the entire world as the heroes know it should have changed irreversibly.

It's very likely you already have your finale planned. Sometimes, the final adventure is the spark that inspires the campaign to begin with.

HEADING OUT FROM HERE

It's all been a lot to take in. I know. You may be reaching the end now and thinking 'how the hell am I going to run a great game with all this swimming in my head'. Don't worry. You're already running a great game. Just now, you have a few extra tools in your box to draw on when you need them. Keep doing what you're doing my friend, just remember to occasionally ask yourself: Where is the risk?



"EMILY CALLS THIS
CHARACTER 'GALACTIC
BEYONCE!'"

-THE GM



HIGH POWERED GAMES

—BY TRACY SIZEMORE

One of the ways *Savage Worlds* differs from other systems is in its flexibility of power levels from game to game and setting to setting.

In *East Texas University*, for example, you play average college students struggling to pass their classes while facing supernatural horrors they are not reasonably equipped to deal with (at least at first). By contrast, in *Rifts*® for *Savage Worlds*, you play high powered characters who have a diverse assortment of skills, are tough as tanks, or even have advanced magical or psionic abilities.

As a GM, it's important to understand how *Savage Worlds* handles this dichotomy and what the advantages and disadvantages are for each type of game.

To start, let's talk about advancement in *Savage Worlds* and rising character power levels.

HORIZONTAL POWER VS. VERTICAL POWER

Up to a certain point in character advancement, characters become more skilled and do more damage. This can be described as building power "vertically" and is common among many game systems. *Savage Worlds* differs somewhat because

it has a hard cap on how much fighting ability, magical power, or damage dice a character can accumulate, even in high powered settings like those featuring super heroes.

After these limits are reached, character advancement becomes more "horizontal" — or more about flexibility than raw power. The side-effect of this approach is that even the most powerful player characters can still be wiped out by just a few enemy Wild Cards. It makes fighting a dangerous proposition at all levels. It's exciting and helps *Savage Worlds* live up to its name. Simultaneously, advanced characters are also more flexible and can therefore handle a wider variety of challenges.

This is by design and is a fun way to play and develop dynamic characters. From this perspective, the question of power level becomes less about how destructive or effective the characters are in the setting and more about the kind of experience the players are looking for.

TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

Some players enjoy a simpler game that doesn't overwhelm them with combat options and leaves more room for



narrative interaction. Others value a more tactically oriented experience with lots of abilities, and more destructive weapons on bigger battlefields. Both are valid, and neither one precludes the possibility of the player characters becoming both powerful forces in the world and the vulnerable targets of its biggest threats.

NORMAL POWER LEVELS

Normal power levels are the average for most *Savage Worlds* settings. Choosing a normal power level game, like *East Texas University* or *Deadlands*, means your character starts with some modest skills and a couple Edges, then builds naturally, giving you time to adjust to their increased Traits and abilities as they advance. You have only a few rules to keep track of since each character is relatively straightforward and easy to understand.

Games like this run smoother, faster, and are usually more inviting to new-comers.

They allow players to concentrate more on what their characters do and less on the mechanics of how they do it.

Although this option may seem as if characters are less narratively “powerful,” that’s not necessarily true. For example, students at *East Texas University* can grow to become mighty and respected saviors of the world while never rolling more than a d8, Fighting die or relying on more than three or four Combat Edges. Similarly, *Deadlands* characters start small and finish big, transforming the landscape and spreading hope to the world while only having a few powers and a couple of six-shooters at their disposal.

HIGH POWER LEVELS

Selecting a high-power level game, like *Rifts*® or supers from the *Savage Worlds Super Powers Companion*, means embracing the mechanics and subtleties of the *Savage Worlds*’ combat system.

Characters have flexibility with lots of Edges, diverse powers, multiple skill-sets, or heavily armed vehicles and hi-tech equipment that often dig into the deepest rules options.

Combats tend to take place over larger map areas, and there is a veritable menu of options for each action because characters have several abilities to choose from. Spaceship combat in the *Savage Worlds Science Fiction Companion* uses high damage weapons and vehicles with lots of different systems. More options mean more rules and more complexity. This type of game allows those who love tactics, rolling more dice, and embracing

the more structured nature of gaming to flourish.

However, playing at high power levels doesn't necessarily mean characters have more narrative power in the game. For example, *Rifts*® characters working for the Tomorrow Legion face a large array of powerful organizations and dangerous foes who can easily overwhelm them. It also doesn't mean role playing elements aren't desired or important. A large space combat encounter in *The Last Parsec* can become the backdrop for all kinds of meaningful character stories and interactions.



High-power level encounters can be tactical and fun, and although they often require more attention to mechanics, they don't have to sacrifice personal stories or narrative meaning in the process.

POWER VERSUS DANGER

Power levels don't necessarily correlate to how dangerous a game is. *Savage Worlds* has several Setting Rules in its tool box to help you manage how deadly it is, regardless of power level. The Wound Cap, for example, can be used to limit the number of Wounds any given character can take in one hit. This can save lives if it's appropriate in your setting. Heroes Never Die offers an alternative to the usual Bleeding Out rules, and setting-specific Death and Defeat tables (like those found in *Rifts*® and the *Savage Worlds* Super Powers Companion) help make the world a more cinematic and heroic place.

Of course, you can also embrace the danger. The Gritty Damage Setting Rule is appropriate if you want your game to be particularly unforgiving. It adds Injuries to the Wounds characters take and compounds the danger by further weakening them when they're already vulnerable.

CHOOSE YOUR EXPERIENCE

The point of all this is that higher mechanical power doesn't necessarily equate to higher stakes. Conversely, lower power levels don't have to be relegated to small-scale stories or less capable characters. Both power levels can accommodate both game types — the difference is in the kind of play experience they each offer at the table.

Normal powered games are core to the *Savage Worlds* experience, offering flexible, intuitive play for both new players and veterans alike. High-powered games attract players who enjoy greater complexity, deeper engagement with the rules, and a variety of gear, abilities

and combat options. Both can support grand adventures to save the world, modest stories of personal growth, and everything in between. It's a matter of choosing the experience that's best for you and your players.

UNPREDICTABILITY

You can teach new-comers to play *Savage Worlds* in less than five minutes. Although there are certainly plenty of surrounding mechanics and situational rules ready to supplement it when needed, the heart of the game is the basic Trait roll.

At first look, that simple roll — your Trait die plus a Wild Die, take the best of the two, and your target is usually a four — might seem a little too simple, but hidden underneath it is a much deeper gaming philosophy.

ACES

Savage Worlds uses a roll-high mechanic, meaning the higher you roll, the better. Complimentary to that is a rule called "Aces." When a die rolls its highest number, you take that number and roll the die again, adding to the total. You continue doing this as long as the die continues to "Ace." In this way, you can end up with Trait rolls in double digits with multiple raises. You do this with damage rolls too.

One of the obvious effects of this mechanic (and incidentally, one of the most difficult things for GMs new to *Savage Worlds* to embrace) is unpredictability. From one perspective, this can seem like a bad thing. The meticulously planned climax of a long campaign might feel undermined when your main villain is taken out by a lucky hit in the first round. Likewise, if a hero gets clobbered with seven Wounds from one attack, Soaking enough of them to avoid a grisly demise can be almost impossible.

It's understandable when players and GMs are initially discouraged by occurrences like this, and there are several methods we'll look at later that can help lessen the danger of these things happening. Still, we believe this unpredictability is a feature, not a bug, and here are a couple reasons why.

EXCITEMENT

Occasionally, characters need to do remarkable things against the odds. This is where a combination of Bennies and Aces start to shine. Whether it's a big bad villain with a high Toughness and scary abilities or it's the last round of a dangerous ritual at East Texas University, these desperate situations are exactly when the unpredictability of *Savage Worlds* can make an entire gaming table erupt in cheers.

The adage of needing to feel the lowest lows to appreciate the highest highs is at work here too, and *Savage Worlds* is designed to be a game of danger and excitement in equal measure. It's rare when a player character gets Incapacitated due to a lucky shot, but part of the fun is the danger that it might happen. It's similarly rare for a dangerous villain to be taken out in one hit, but in certain circumstances it can be a thrilling moment your players won't soon forget.

ENGAGING QUIET PLAYERS

The Fast, Furious and Fun philosophy is a key part of *Savage Worlds*, and it can be especially impactful when you have a quiet player at your table. We've seen it time and again. When the team's backs are against the wall, a single, well-timed roll saves the day and makes a hero out of the most unlikely character.

Player creativity is critical to the roleplaying experience, of course, but the heroes we play are supposed to be able to do things we, as players, can't. The *Savage*

Worlds' dice mechanic helps redirect the spotlight back toward the character by providing remarkable moments of extraordinary success — moments that are equally inclusive of quiet, more cerebral players as they are the more outgoing types. This is another happy side-effect of Aces.

Obviously, if you have a quiet player at the table, you want to engage them as best you can while still respecting their social comfort level, but some players honestly enjoy sitting back, watching the action and just rolling some dice to find out what happens. This gives those players a chance to be rewarded with as much agency as those they share the table with. It's a powerful effect, and these moments can be particularly meaningful to people who feel overwhelmed by the pressure to be clever problem solvers or expert improvisational actors.

MANAGING UNPREDICTABILITY

Even with all the positive aspects it brings, sometimes we don't want our *Savage Worlds* to be quite so savage. Fortunately, there are several ways to manage unpredictability in the game. Some of the most effective have nothing to do with rules. Instead, they have to do with how you create and manage adventures.

CREATE GOALS THAT ARE COMBAT ADJACENT

The goal of an encounter doesn't necessarily need to be about the combat itself. In fact, it's often more interesting and dynamic if it isn't. For example, if a villain is holding the mayor's son captive in hopes of getting someone important released from prison, the encounter to rescue the son from the secure building he's being held in is first and foremost about rescuing him. Sure, there's likely going to be a fight and yes, defeating the bad guys is nice, but ultimately, that's not what the heroes are there to do.

In other words, the combat encounter is only an obstacle, not the objective. This kind of thinking helps manage in-game danger because achieving the goal could take many forms, even if the heroes aren't able to outright defeat those who are trying to stop them.

Sometimes even heroes get in over their heads, and it's often just as interesting to see how they handle that as it is to see them dominate their opponents. Deciding to run away can be an equally valid and dramatic choice. Although this can seem unsatisfying to your players in the moment, it can lead to an even more satisfying victory later. Occasionally facing overwhelming foes forces heroes to approach situations with creativity and out-of-the-box thinking. The key is to encourage those strategic withdrawals and clever solutions, and then reward the team generously when they execute them.

COMPLEX VILLAINS

Another technique you can use to help mitigate the wide swing of the *Savage Worlds* dice pendulum is to give depth and personality to the Wild Card villains. Assigning bad guys complex motivations and quirky Hindrances of their own leads to surprising decisions and shifting priorities that may redirect their attention. It can also make them feel more authentic and interesting.

For example, a villain may be more interested in convincing the heroes of his brilliant ideas or radical world view than he is in killing them. Another villain may be at odds with her mastermind boss and make tactical decisions based on her own interests rather than those of the person she's working for. If it's appropriate for your setting, villains who are thoughtful and devious can make for a far more



interesting game while also making it a marginally less deadly one.

Keep in mind, smart villains don't expose themselves to danger unless they have to. Many of them use lieutenants and minions to do their dirty work until they have no other choice but direct confrontation. When they do end up on the field of combat, however, they are vulnerable — even if only a little bit — and we think that's the way it should be.

LOTS OF EXTRAS, FEW WILD CARDS

Extras are the GM's best friend. Using lots of them and only one or two Wild Card villains is a great way to set up an encounter. Extras can be relatively easy for heroes to take out, so there can be a lot of them on the field. This creates a sense of danger and a satisfying experience for the players while still offering a chance that one of those Extra's dice Ace to deliver a mighty blow.

Individually, Extras are less dangerous since they don't roll Wild Dice, but collectively they still present a legitimate threat thanks to Gang Up bonuses and sheer numbers. Setting up encounters this way not only makes fights a little more predictable, but having fewer Wild Cards is also much easier for a GM to manage at the table.

Finally, don't forget, just because they're Extras doesn't mean they can't be skilled fighters with powerful abilities. With the new Resilient Special Ability, they can even take Wounds! Mid-level leaders created this way can be very dangerous, even without a Wild Die.

SETTING RULES

Arguably, the most problematic situation where the unpredictability of *Savage Worlds* comes into play is the rare event when your big bad villain gets taken out in one shot on the first round of your campaign-ending climax. The same is true on the other side. When a hero

gets hit for more Wounds than he can reasonably Soak, it can take him out of the big fight before it even starts (and potentially out of the game altogether). In this situation the goal is to defeat the villain or die trying, and no amount of GM trickery can change that.

Fortunately, there are a couple of key Setting Rules especially designed to handle this.

WOUND CAP

Wound Cap offers a way to limit the number of Wounds any character can take from a single hit to no more than four, making her much more likely to Soak and stay in the fight (or live to run away). We strongly considered making Wound Cap a core rule, but ultimately decided against it because of all the reasons stated previously.

That said, Wound Cap is there for a reason, so don't be afraid to use it. It also doesn't have to be universally applied. You might decide it's a Setting Rule only for Wild Cards or just a few rare and very powerful "bosses," for example. Finally, keep in mind that especially large monsters can now take more than three Wounds before they go down and will be a bit more durable as well!

As for the heroes, the Wound Cap can give your players a little peace of mind that a lucky hit won't take them out of the fight before they even have a chance to participate. *Savage Worlds* is still dangerous even with Wound Cap in play, but the rule tempers the occurrence of those rare edge-cases when "lucky" dice don't feel so lucky.

FANATICS

For villains in certain types of games, the Fanatics Setting Rule keeps the main bad guy alive as his henchmen step in and take the big hits instead. This is a fun way to keep your villain from being one-punched during the ultimate showdown.



You could use a powerful Extra, for example, perhaps even with the Resilient or Very Resilient abilities, as a sentinel for your main bad guy. While this is generally only appropriate for pulpy or cinematic games, it's another tool you have at your disposal when needed.

AGES AND THE CULTURE OF SAVAGE WORLDS

In the last two decades, the *Savage Worlds* community has developed into one of the most friendly and exciting in all of gaming. It's easy to spot a room full of *Savage Worlds* tables at a convention thanks to the lively atmosphere, fast gameplay, and the cheers (or moans) following a lucky roll. Embracing this philosophy of unforeseen outcomes can be uncomfortable at first, but it's well worth it.

The unpredictability of *Savage Worlds* is a key part of the game itself. It encourages dynamic play styles, creative adventure design, thoughtful threat analysis, risky moves, and interesting character dilemmas. While we have presented several techniques to manage it, we

encourage you to let your guard down on occasion and embrace it as well.

Ultimately, if a hero gets hurt, he's not likely to die if he has allies around who can help him. And if a dangerous named villain is taken out at the beginning of the combat, so what? Why not let the players and their characters have that moment? They earned it, and there's always another threat around the next corner. Part of the fun of roleplaying is to discover what happens, and sometimes that unexpected discovery can be far more interesting than the well-laid plans it might have disrupted.

Still, don't be afraid to utilize these techniques and rules as you see fit. *Savage Worlds* and the various Setting Rules in the Adventure Toolkit are designed to be flexible and cover all types of genres, from the wacky tone of something like *The Goon*TM to the hardcore realism of a modern-day thriller.

"THAT LOOKS LIKE AN AWESOME TABLE! LOOK AT ALL THE TOYS! ER, I MEAN...PROPS"

-THE GM



BUILDING YOUR TRIBE

—BY CHRIS FUCHS AND CHRIS LANDAUER
OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN SAVAGES

So you want to take your love of *Savage Worlds* to the next level and build a community around the hobby and the game? We'll show you how with battle-tested advice on event organizing, running games, and even being a better player.

HOW TO BUILD YOUR TRIBE

Over the last decade, the Rocky Mountain Savages (RMS) have grown from a single GM running one game at one convention to a rotating stable of dozens of Game Masters hosting 100 games over four days, twice a year, and numerous other games at smaller conventions. We bring in industry luminaries to game with us, some even move here and join our community, and we also foster a surprising amount of new gaming talent to enter the professional ranks and publish games.

We'd love to see other groups running a "Savage 100," so we're willing to divulge our secrets. Here's our advice to guide you through the early, mid, and late stages of community-building, especially how to build relationships with event organizers, attracting and encouraging Game Masters, advocating for your players and GMs, and convention best-practices.

LIGHT THE SPARK

It starts with one game, that's all you need to begin your adventure. Gather friends, post in a local game store, find a nearby RPG meetup, submit an event to an already established game day or convention, or host a game online. If you're a player, get out there and attend a game. The founders of the RMS met at a convention game which was the only non-fantasy setting being run at the entire show. We realized we needed more diversity in gaming content and the spark was lit.

ADVERTISE EARLY

Gaming is a time-consuming social hobby, so the more advance notice you can give your audience to find your game and block out time for it, the better. We advertise individual games and game days more than a month in advance, conventions more than six months in advance, and upcoming games to be published more than a year out. Players should be sure to RSVP early to let organizers make the best plan and know they're coming. Games submitted to events and advertised early allows them to fill up quickly, which is itself a catalyst for more games to be offered and more people to attend.

BUILD A CONTACT LIST

Keep a business card file, rolodex, spreadsheet, e-mail list, or other collection of contact information for all the people you meet along your gaming journey. It's easy to overlook this at the start, but it will become the most important tool in your box during the mid and mature stages of building your community. (And of course contact them only with their permission.)

Likewise, give out your contact information to the people you meet so they can reach you easily. E-mail is a must, phone calls and texts are great, but nothing beats a face-to-face chat to build relationships and secure commitments from other gamers. Reconnect every few months if you can and let them know what's going on with the local gaming scene.

BUILD A BRAND

The importance of building a brand is easy to overlook at the beginning of your journey. If your eventual goal is to have a club, or a convention, or be a game designer and publisher, it can't hurt to

build a brand along with your growing list of contacts.

A website or social media page that is publicly searchable helps others find you and get details about your upcoming events. Use an e-mail submission form so people can subscribe to updates about your events. Clever business cards, custom printed dice, and t-shirts with your logo are all great ways to advertise your brand.

BE CONSISTENT

From getting a public campaign going at a local game store to establishing a thousand-person convention, consistency and patience will help you grow your audience. Commit to run your game at the same time and place multiple times before you reconsider your schedule. Getting started from nothing is hard, and an established marketing adage is that customers need to see your message at least seven times before they'll commit to take action.

There's no true magic number, but quitting early is a guaranteed failure.



Most conventions run on the same weekend every year and often at the same hotel. If your event announcement email comes on the same day every month or you release a video or podcast every week, your audience will come to anticipate and appreciate your consistency.

BUILD A COMMUNITY PLATFORM

As your contact list grows and the number of events you attend and run expands, you'll benefit by allowing the community to interact with each other.

RMS started with a reply-all email chain, grew to a Yahoo Group email list and regular face-to-face meetings at local restaurants to coordinate GM schedules for upcoming conventions. We briefly flirted with Meetups, but soon outgrew the affordable package.

Rapid mid-stage level growth required the purchase of a domain name and a forum, and then a Facebook group, which has become less useful the more Facebook changes their algorithm of who gets to see your posts.

The lesson there is not to rely on a single platform. The future comes fast and the most popular platforms for communication change or even go out of business. Don't let access to your community go down with them!

One of the driving factors in the maturation of our club was asking the question, "Can the club survive if the convention we attend goes out of business?" In response we began hosting our own independent events just so we know how and can continue to if need be.

OWN YOUR INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

The one thing that has saved RMS over many migrations is owning our name and thus our brand. It started with getting a domain name and making sure it was pre-paid for many years. www.RockyMountainSavages.com is our home until domain names and web pages go out of style and you can always reach us at admin@rockymountainsavages.com no matter what client or host or software we use behind it.



We've also incorporated as an LLC to protect our ability to publish content on a variety of platforms and to allow for future transitions of leadership and group assets. What we've built is greater than any individual and so we put the tools in place to ensure longevity and success even when our membership changes.

KEEP RECORDS

In addition to keeping track of your Game Masters and players, record your organization's accomplishments. It will help you establish credibility when negotiating with conventions in the future, "We have organized three game days, one convention, and 15 in-store games this year." This will also help you discover and recognize your most active GMs and players.

RECOGNIZE AND REWARD ALLIES

Game Masters are the heart of your community. Their efforts drive the life and growth of the hobby. The RMS makes it a point at every "Savage Saturday Night" to present our Game Masters with awards for their hard work, tallying the number of games and conventions where they've volunteered.

It's also important to recognize other advocates whose efforts contribute to your success: the coordinators and owners of game days and conventions, the store hosts, the publishers who provide swag, convention staff, and anyone else who works to promote the hobby and your club. You should also make sure to recognize those players who not only show up to your events, but are consistently good sports and welcoming to others.

Rewarding those efforts demonstrates that your organization sees and appreciates how people are contributing to the overall effort, encouraging their participation for years to come.

NEGOTIATE ON BEHALF OF GMS

Gaming can be an expensive hobby, and anything you can do to lower those costs for Game Masters can assist in maintaining their willingness to volunteer.

If your local convention doesn't have a policy that rewards GMs with a free entry badge in exchange for running a sufficient number of games or hours of volunteering, advocate for one. We suggest that smaller and new events offer GMs a free one-day badge if they run at least one four-hour game. For our Thursday through Sunday conventions, we advocate a free weekend badge for running at least three games. All events are different, but it should be obvious to event hosts that RPG volunteers do a lot of work and spend a lot of their own money to show up and run games, so a free entry badge is a fair trade for all.

NEGOTIATE ON BEHALF OF YOURSELF

When your organization reaches a certain size, you should also begin to negotiate in-kind benefits on behalf of your organizers. For instance, asking for a semi-private dedicated space to host an event like Savage Saturday Night or a private room for your guest of honor to run games are reasonable requests that will allow you to gather like-minded gamers in one area and give away prizes without bothering the other convention attendees.

If your game offerings reach such a level that your on-site coordination efforts are necessary, it's reasonable to ask the event hosts to allow you to purchase your hotel room at the con-organizer rate, or even for a free hotel room as you are acting in a similar capacity to convention staff.

NEGOTIATE ON BEHALF OF YOUR GUESTS

One of the first things the nascent RMS did was push for Shane Hensley to be flown in as the Role Playing Game Guest of Honor. It was a fantastic way to get

the local community to realize that the club existed and was serious about its growing participation in *Savage Worlds*.

In the years since we've had Clint and Jodi Black and their daughters as guests. They ran and played *Savage Worlds* and their children ran games for Con Junior.

When you're selecting guests, don't forget your local talent, even if they're attending the convention anyway. You can help raise the profile of your endemic stars by asking the convention to list them as special guests and comping their badges, asking them to take part in panels, or even charity events.

NEGOTIATE ON BEHALF OF YOUR CLUB

Conventions are a business. All of the websites, swag, awards, guest flights and rooms, GM resources, handouts and advertising, don't magically pay for themselves.

One way to generate income for your club is to monetize the games at your conventions. First, get buy-in from your Game Masters as it's their work you're asking money for.

Second, work with your convention hosts to arrive at a reasonable payment for games. We began with a \$1 per hour per player ticket charge, so \$4 for a four-hour game, with \$3 of that going to the club and \$1 going to the convention to pay for table rentals. This varies *greatly* by venue.

Depending on your needs, you can start with something as simple as a tip jar on the game table or an honorarium from the hosting organization all the way up to a contracted fee with the convention hosts that comes out of the ticket sales and is otherwise "invisible" to the players.

Finally, get buy-in from the players by letting them know how their ticket money is being spent, i.e. Savage Saturday Night or Friday Night Bar Fight events, giveaways, advertising games, etc.

HOST YOUR OWN EVENTS

Even if you can't yet afford to contract out an event space, running your own events is an important means of fulfilling your club's mission.

At an existing convention, host a Friday Night Bar Fight (more casual adult-only evening games held at small tables in the hotel bar or lounge) or a Savage Saturday Night (a celebration of your community that can include announcements, awards, giveaways, and other social bonding activities before everyone breaks off to play *Savage Worlds* games), or even just a breakfast for your Game Masters to sit at the same table and share stories.

Outside of conventions, run an event at a friendly local gaming store. Promote a virtual convention using online gaming platforms. Organize games for charity or a holiday or just-because. Regardless of the venue, do the legwork and brand it using your club's IP along with your hosts and beneficiaries.

RMS didn't invent Savage Saturday Night (SSN), but we certainly made our mark by running some of the largest with more than 20 fully-filled games running at the same time.

Consider the power of that original idea: it takes advantage of branding and IP with the name and it establishes a consistent routine by being on the Saturday evening of whatever convention it's running at. That's why it's grown and spread around the world.

In addition to SSN, we also run Friday Night Bar Fights, a clever name, an established day, and a unique experience that's different from the traditional gaming slots.

We have also run living campaigns which have garnered GM commitment over multiple conventions and years. With the RMS *Deadlands Twilight Legion* events we cultivated a group of players who portrayed "living" characters and

GMs who loosely coordinated their game plots. It was a smashing success.

We also ran similar events for *Weird Wars Rome* and *East Texas University*, where Game Master Sara Martinez ran a group of players through a real-time four-year college campaign.

BUILD YOUR TOOLBOX

The ability of the RMS to grow and tackle new challenges has been made possible by leveraging the tools we acquired at each earlier stage.

Naming our club got us brand recognition which resulted in a website to provide information and capture new interest, which necessitated a web host to serve our webpage. That became very handy when we wanted to host our own forum, and then host the large files required to publish the SavageCast podcast, and then the databases necessary to house the Savagepedia.

Those later efforts were much easier to accomplish because we already had

the infrastructure in place. Likewise, the email lists we gathered allowed us to reach out to our community in effective ways at each stage of our growth. This also allowed us to select a steering committee based on players and GM participation in past events.

We think of each growth stage as the foundation of the next.

USE A PERSONAL TOUCH

Getting folks a drink or snack when they don't have time to grab lunch between back-to-back games or making sure people have character sheets and pencils and dice let your players and GMs focus on their games.

You should also make sure everyone who wants to play in a *Savage Worlds* game gets the chance.

PROVIDE AND ACCEPT FEEDBACK

No one likes criticism, but it's important to have a means for people to provide feedback on their experiences at your events, anonymous or otherwise. You'll



be spending a lot of time managing things on a meta level that your players and GMs have no idea about, so it can be easy to miss issues that happen at a table while you're off trying to find an overflow room or get players into a backup game when their GM doesn't show up.

Having feedback you can review later lets you refine your strategies when you have more time to be circumspect. Asking direct questions about different aspects of the convention while talking with people casually is also a great way of identifying what's working and what isn't.

Of course you also have to take action on that feedback. Let your convention hosts and hotel staff know if there are issues that need to be addressed with some haste. If the issues are not as pressing, it's often better to wait until after the event to have a sit down to decompress and debrief.

If you have an issue with a player or Game Master, it's much better to handle them quickly when they arise and then revisit after for more in-depth analysis. For instance, if there's a player-GM dispute, the first action is typically to ask the player to leave the game for a refund or you can help them find another game to attend and let the GM finish with the other players.

We tell our GMs to run their games as if it were their living room. It's their table, their rules, and players are a guest and should behave as such. When disputes arise, resolve it as quickly as possible then follow up later when there's time to hear all sides and make calm decisions.

VOLUNTEER

The best way to get gaming allies on your side is to be an ally for them. If you want to run a larger event at a game store, you'll get a lot more cooperation if you first agree to volunteer and run some games there. And don't forget to encourage the players you attract to spend a little money

at the store if it's within their means, even if it's just for snacks.

When your club is large enough to warrant a close relationship with a convention, you can ask and receive more favors if you volunteer to help set up and take down the convention tables, run registration, or even serve as convention staff. You can't have a better relationship with the RPG coordinator than if you *are* the RPG coordinator. You don't have to do all this work yourself, encourage your members to step up and volunteer and seek greater leadership roles in the community.

MAKE FRIENDS

You'll notice a lot of this advice is the same sort of things often given to cultivate meaningful relationships with other people. That's no coincidence. Gaming is an intensely social hobby and one of the best rewards that can come from your efforts is growing your own personal circle of friends and associates.

We certainly could not have succeeded if we were merely savvy business types or primarily motivated by our own gaming ambitions. In fact, we're not savvy business types and almost all of our gaming ambitions are the result of, not the cause of, the success we've had while just trying to get people together to have fun. The past and present owners of the local conventions are our personal friends, fueled by our mutual love of the hobby and by the long hours we've put in together to make these events a success.

EMBRACE THE LIFESTYLE

We really like playing games. And even though the trajectory of the RMS started with that simple desire and has led to many of our members becoming authors and podcasters and event coordinators and publishers and now lecturers on gaming, that remains the highest and best purpose of our time.

It's not just a hobby, it's a lifestyle. We do all those other things because we love to game and not the other way around. There really is something magical about a group of people sitting around a table, losing themselves in a bit of fantasy and escape for a few hours, breaking down barriers and building bonds. Being part of that — even a catalyst and facilitator for it — is a wonderful reward in itself.

HOW TO GAME MASTER A CONVENTION GAME

Introduce yourself. Welcome the players to your game and allow them to greet each other. Remind them what adventure they'll be playing in, explain the pregenerated characters, answer questions, and assess the experience level of your players.

PREPARE SUFFICIENT MATERIAL

Plan for up to four hours of content to entertain the players. Don't assume they're familiar with *Savage Worlds* or the game setting so be ready to provide a brief introduction. Review the system rules yourself, especially those you know will come up during the session, so they're fresh in your mind. Use bookmarks or prepare cheat sheets for special rules you'll be using as well as nonplayer character stats and scene notes.

START WITH THE BASICS

The most important thing to teach is a simple skill roll. Start the adventure with a Notice roll or something equally simple. Let them roll the dice and find out that they're looking for a 4, but higher results are better.

DEVELOP THE STORY INTO SCENES

You should have a beginning, middle and end in mind and be sure to take the setting into account. Make sure your adventure fits the game world, and be

sure to emphasize the setting as part of the stage your adventurers get to play on.

Often players come to your table based off the setting description. If they came for superhero comic hour don't present *Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol* with werewolves (cool as that sounds!).

CHANGE UP PACING AND STYLE BETWEEN SCENES

Each scene should have its own texture and feeling. A steady diet of combat, like cake, can be great at first but gets old without variation.

Look to emphasize roleplaying by presenting nonplayer characters as something besides target dummies. Using Interludes, Chases, Dramatic Tasks and other special rules during the session can develop a story flow and avoid repetition.

PROVIDE USEFUL PREGENERATED CHARACTERS

Of course you want to provide characters that are up to the challenge of your adventure. They should also be interesting and useful. Nothing kills a player's enthusiasm more than thinking their character is useless.

You can also help your players by giving them a snapshot of the character's history, motivation, and possibly even how they see the other pregenerated characters. Don't overdo it though — most players won't read (or need) more than a few paragraphs. You also take away some agency from the player if there's no room to inject *their* vision into the character.

You can also let the group decide on their character's names and backgrounds themselves, but make sure to focus on that early in the session before the focus switches to the adventure.

You shouldn't always feel bound by the character creation rules, either. Those are designed as a basis of fairness, but you can do whatever makes sense for your specific game. If deviating from the rules

slightly allows you to produce interesting and balanced characters that fit your scenario, go for it.

RUN THE SYSTEM AS WRITTEN—MOSTLY

Even though we just told you to take a little license with the rules when it makes for easier preparation or a more exciting game, don't stray too far from the core system.

When you do introduce "house rules" or significant changes in public games, let the players know up front. Some of the games we've seen go awry involved the GM running the game in a way that deviated from how the system works best, giving new players a very wrong impression of the game and causing experienced players to scratch their heads in confusion.

PLAYER AGENCY

Let the players game as they wish and reward them as suits their actions. If your barbarian decides to try negotiation first, or your mage takes spells that emphasize trickery more than damage, reward them and modify your scenario on the fly to make those choices meaningful and productive. Likewise, most players will be willing to accept a bit of a "railroad" (a linear adventure path) in a convention game, but don't be afraid to go off the rails if it makes for a better, more exciting game.

FAST! FURIOUS! FUN!

Use situational rules to highlight the system and setting. Chases, Dramatic Tasks, Mass Battles, Quick Encounters, and Social Conflicts all add focus and tension to an adventure while avoiding making every scene an extended tactical encounter. Pick at least one to give a prominent place in your adventure.

HOW TO PLAY IN A CONVENTION GAME

There's lot of advice about running convention games, but how about some tips on how to play in these games? Here's some of the best wisdom we've gathered from our community.

BE IN CHARGE OF YOUR OWN ENJOYMENT

Pick the right games to play in by reading the whole blurb, not just looking at the titles.

Introduce yourself to the GM and the other players before the game starts.

Be present during the game. Put the distractions away (like your phone). Make eye contact. Be ready when your turn comes.

Select a character you're interested in playing. Ask the GM for clarification on any details you don't understand and ask to change any aspects you're uninterested or uncomfortable in portraying.

Get involved in the story. Find or make reasons for your character to interact with the other players and the GM. Give them something to work with in crafting their own portrayals.

Share the spotlight. Do heroic things *with, and not to the exclusion of*, the other players.

You don't have to be a master of the rules and mechanics to fully contribute to the game. Describe what you want to attempt and let the GM help you make and interpret the correct rolls.

Buy into the story. Note the mood, setting, and genre. Cracking out of character jokes is fine in limited doses, but read the table and make sure you're not ruining the adventure for others.

Don't derail a planned adventure without trying to work within the framework first. Most convention games won't be as freeform or sandbox as a home game.

Interact in character. Speak, strategize and negotiate as your character when you can. It's fun and adds to the immersion for everyone else.

Use those Bennies! They allow you to try more difficult maneuvers, change your initiative order, do multiple actions and take risks. But don't be afraid to fail, sometimes these are the most memorable and fun parts of the story.

Thank your GM and fellow players. A few kind words go a long way to acknowledge the time and effort your GM and hosts have spent for your enjoyment. A few compliments also rises all boats, keeping everyone in a great mood as you vanquish evil and save the world.

Provide measured feedback. Let your GM and convention staff know about issues they're able to control and improve upon, but do so in a manner that increases the odds of positive change. If a minor issue arises during a game, wait for (or ask for) a break to pull the GM aside to talk.

If all else fails, politely excuse yourself from the game. Your time is valuable and if the game isn't to your liking, no amount of debate or arguing can really change the situation. Be courteous to your GM and fellow players by exiting the game politely and without judgment if possible — sometimes a game just isn't for everyone.

Become more than a player. Start running games of your own, volunteer to help set up or take down tables, donate prizes to be given away at special events, or lend your artistic or other talents to the clubs and conventions to help them accomplish their goals.


Have fun. Create fun. Give fun. There's no zero-sum balance on fun and you don't lose any of it for yourself by giving it to others, you only watch it grow.

PARTING THOUGHTS

That's our compiled wisdom from over a decade of playing, running, and organizing games as the Rocky Mountain Savages. While it might seem like a lot to take in, realize that we started as players, graduated to Game Masters, and then to RPG and convention organizers.

If you get the basics right and treat everyone around you courteously, the rest will follow naturally. You've already chosen a truly great game and community to be a part of, so go now and share it with others!





TURNING IDEAS INTO SWAG

—BY RICHARD WOOLCOCK

Roleplaying games are a creative endeavor, and it's not uncommon — particularly within the *Savage Worlds* community — for Game Masters to share their creations. But the idea of turning those ideas into published products can be intimidating, especially for newcomers.

Fortunately, the process is easier than ever, thanks to the proliferation of guides, tools, online stores, and print-on-demand services. In many ways, we're living in a golden age for indie publishers, and the *Savage Worlds* Adventurer's Guild (SWAG) hosted by OneBookShelf (OBS) makes it even simpler.

In this article, I'd like to share my experience and give some tips and insight. I don't work for a publishing company, I'm not even an Ace (an officially approved licensee), so I'm writing this purely as a fellow *Savage Worlds* fan. I turned my idea into an ENnie Award-winning published setting, and you can do the same.

GETTING STARTED

Some game designers may tell you that ideas are cheap, that the real challenge is turning those ideas into polished products. They have a point, but you do still need a good idea before you get

started, and you can draw inspiration from many different sources — movies, novels, video or board games, other tabletop roleplaying games, real-world mythology, urban legends, and so on. Don't copy directly, but treat those sources as a "buffet of ideas," combining them into something new and exciting. If your game concept doesn't excite you now, how will you ever motivate yourself to write an entire book?

Start by listing the essential features of your setting as a series of bullet points, and gradually flesh out the details as they come to mind. Make sure your design goals are listed at the top and write an elevator pitch early on. If you can't summarize your setting in 50–100 words, try to simplify and streamline it.

There are tools you can use to organize your thoughts, such as OneNote and Evernote, or you can save text files in a folder on your computer. The important thing is you keep all your ideas in one place, especially when you're working on multiple projects at once — and you may well come up with ideas for future settings before finishing your current one. Record those ideas and keep them somewhere safe, but try not to get too sidetracked!

I recommend you start sketching a rough map for your setting as early as possible, either by hand, with a drawing program, or using an online tool (such as Inkarnate). Update the map as you develop the setting, but don't bother making it look good, it's just for keeping track of locations. There's nothing worse than trying to retroactively draw a map after finishing the rest of your project, only to discover that you now need to rewrite some of the gazetteer and adventures.

THE WORKING DRAFT

Once your notes start forming complete paragraphs, organize them into a document, using a word processor such as Word or Writer (or perhaps Google Docs, if your project is a collaborative effort).

I find the easiest solution is to divide the document into chapters and split each chapter into sections. You can then jump back and forth between chapters as you work, gradually fleshing out the setting.

But this is an ongoing activity. It will take time and effort, and it can start getting boring. Therefore, once you've got a good overview of your setting, I recommend trying your hand at a One Sheet adventure. Start drumming up interest early on so that once you're ready for playtesting it'll be easier to find volunteers. Having an enthusiastic fanbase is also good for your motivation because they will push if you start to waver, eagerly provide feedback and suggestions, and help you promote your products through reviews and shares.

WRITING AN ADVENTURE

There are various styles of adventure, but I recommend the shorter format used by most *Savage Worlds* settings: One Sheets, Plot Points and Savage Tales. One Sheets are standalone adventures that fit on both sides of a single sheet of paper, Plot Points are the main story arc episodes of a Plot Point Campaign, and Savage Tales are side adventures that can be inserted into the campaign as needed. All three have a similar structure, providing the essential information without overloading the reader with details.

Richard's Saga of the Goblin Horde can now be found in the Savage Worlds Adventurer's Guild on DriveThruRPG!



As a rule of thumb, I suggest aiming for 1,000–1,500 words for a One Sheet or Plot Point, and 800–1,200 words for a Savage Tale. But you don't need to worry about Plot Points and Savage Tales just yet.

For your first adventure, a One Sheet is the ideal choice, as it's designed to be standalone. It's a useful way to find out if there's a market for your idea before investing too much time and effort. I also found One Sheets helped me flesh out my world, giving me fresh ideas to feed back into the setting book. And of course, if you regularly release new One Sheets, it'll help keep your setting in the public eye.

Personally, I like to divide my One Sheets into five scenes, each focused on a specific challenge. Other writers design their adventures from a very different perspective. I suggest downloading some One Sheets from Pinnacle's website, find a few you like, and look at how they're structured.

CREATING ARCHETYPES

Many settings offer an "archetypes" supplement — full pregenerated characters built around a particular role or concept. Archetypes typically consist of a short description with a stat block and illustration. They are usually Novice or Seasoned characters, ideal for one-shot games. Just make sure you have enough for everyone (I'd recommend at least six archetypes).

If your setting is very unusual, a set of archetypes might be required to play your One Sheets. But even if not, they can still be an excellent marketing tool, particularly if you stagger their release. I published one archetype per month while writing my setting, and it certainly helped promote interest in my work.

The setting book itself often includes a list of suggested character types, typically consisting of nothing more than a short description. It's a good idea to keep them in sync with the fully-fleshed out archetypes.

SPLATBOOKS

If you don't feel comfortable tackling a full setting, consider writing a smaller sourcebook covering a new race or character concept, or exploring a particular subject such as deadly traps, magical items, unique monsters, original powers, etc.

STRUCTURING YOUR SETTING

There's no "one true way" to structure a setting, so I recommend looking at other setting books to get a feel for how they approach it. The sequence of nine chapters described below is what I use, but it's still just a loose set of guidelines, not hard rules I feel compelled to follow.

For a full-size setting, you should aim for around 45,000–50,000 words (the word count of Pinnacle's 96-page graphic novel-size books), although there's no reason you can't write a smaller (or larger) book if you prefer.

INTRODUCTION

Provide the reader with an introduction and overview of the setting, aiming for around 2,000–4,000 words, split into 100–300 word sections. The first few paragraphs should also serve as an elevator pitch; try to grab the reader's attention and hold their interest right from the start.

CHARACTERS

This chapter covers character creation and should be around 3,000–8,000 words, depending on how many new options are available. While it focuses more on gameplay, you should still tie everything to the story where possible — even the descriptions of Edges and Hindrances can give the reader hints and clues about the setting. The chapter is usually split up into the following different sections:

■ **MAKING CHARACTERS:** Provide a short overview of the character creation process. If your setting uses new skills

or limits existing ones, mention it here. Any banned Edges or Hindrances should also be listed.

- **ARCHETYPES:** It's common to include a list of 10–20 character concepts, each consisting of a 50–100 word description. Tailor them to the setting, to serve as suggestions for the sort of characters you envision most players choosing. They can also give the reader inspiration for new character concepts and provide further insight into the setting.
- **RACES:** You don't need to add new races. It's okay to stick with humans or reference races from the core rules (or a *Savage Worlds Companion*). But each new race your setting offers should have a 25–100 word description and a list of racial abilities. Use the guidelines in *Savage Worlds* to design and balance your races, but try not to overcomplicate them or stack up too many different options—aim for 3–5 abilities for each race, and rely on Racial Edges to add any further diversity.
- **HINDRANCES:** Setting-specific Hindrances can encourage players to design characters that fit the story. They don't even need to have special rules (many Hindrances provide no mechanical penalties), but they should embody the intended flavor of the setting, serving as a source of inspiration for the reader. I'd recommend adding 5–10 new Hindrances, each around 50–100 words in length.
- **EDGES:** The counterpoint to Hindrances, Edges provide mechanical benefits, and should always invoke the flavor of the setting—whenever you design a new Edge, consider what it adds to the game, whether it's reinforcing a character concept, or encouraging a particular playing style. While it's not always necessary to add new Edges, most setting books do include a selection, players tend to expect them, and it's another opportunity to tie the rules to the story. I would suggest adding 20–30

new Edges, each around 50–100 words in length (if they're much longer than that, there's a good chance they need streamlining).

- **ARCANE BACKGROUNDS:** The final section describes which Arcane Backgrounds are available. There might be a list of those in the core rules, with a short explanation of how they fit into the setting, or there could be detailed write-ups of new options. If you don't allow any Arcane Backgrounds, omit this section and make a short comment in the "Making Characters" section.

GEAR

Setting-specific weapons, armor, and other gear are usually split off into this chapter. I'd suggest aiming for 1,000–4,000 words, not including tables. You could even skip this chapter entirely, but I find new gear can add a lot of flavor to the story. If your setting has its own currency, give an overview of it here.

I'd recommend a 25–50 word description of each item, along with a few illustrations, and include tables at the end for weapon and armor statistics. You can use colorful item descriptions to reinforce the theme of your setting, referencing other parts of the book, such as armor commonly worn by certain races, weapons designed for fighting specific monsters, and so on.

SETTING RULES

One of the concepts that differentiate *Savage Worlds* from many "generic" roleplaying systems is the use of Setting Rules, which allow you to customize the feel of the game without modifying the fundamental design. The core rulebook offers several examples of Setting Rules, and most setting books also add some of their own.

While Setting Rules can be a crucial part of making your setting book feel unique, it's important not to get carried away. They should always support and promote your setting, don't use them as



an excuse to impose your favorite “House Rule” on other people. If you can remove a Setting Rule without detracting from the feel of the setting, then it probably doesn’t belong in the book.

I suggest aiming for around 1,000–3,000 words, with 3–5 Setting Rules. If you don’t have any good ideas for new rules, you can always reference one or two from *Savage Worlds*, or even leave them out entirely. You can also revisit this chapter later, as the need for specific Setting Rules may only become apparent during playtesting.

MAGIC

Not all settings have magic, so feel free to skip or replace this part of the book. A cyberpunk setting might instead offer rules for cybernetics, while a crime setting would probably remove the entire chapter. Even a fantasy setting might only include a few hundred words about dominant religions along with their powers and duties — or it could offer an extensive list of new magical powers.

SETTING INFORMATION / GAZETTEER

The bulk of the setting is described in this chapter, covering geography, history, and any other general knowledge the players should know before they start playing. For a full-size book, you should aim for 15,000–25,000 words of setting information.

Alternatively, you could take a minimalist approach, and replace this chapter with a 2,000–5,000 word gazetteer. Include a list of the locations from your map, each with 50–200 word descriptions, and treat the rest of the setting information as “secrets” that are revealed later on, during the campaign.

GAME MASTER’S SECTION

Everything before this point in the book is intended for the players to read, and can even be split off into a separate player’s handbook if so desired. But in this chapter, you can start revealing the secrets of the setting — including anything that’s not relevant to the players (such as tips for running the campaign), or spoilers and other content that should only be read by the Game Master.

ADVENTURES

Many settings offer a Plot Point Campaign — an epic overarching storyline, broken down into 10–12 Plot Point adventures. The campaign often comes with dozens of Savage Tales and an adventure generator. Unsurprisingly, this requires a lot of work.

For a smaller book, try offering fewer (or no) Savage Tales. The Plot Points combined with an adventure generator are more than sufficient for a campaign, and you can always throw in some adventure seeds (50–100 words each) as a compromise, then expand the setting later with One Sheets (which also continues to promote your line). You could also reduce the number of Plot Points. Even 5–6 of them provide a solid basis for a smaller-scale campaign.

But no matter how small your setting, I'd always recommend including at least a few adventures and an adventure generator. That gives the reader enough content to run for their group and some guidelines for creating new adventures of their own.

BESTIARY

New monsters are popular with Game Masters, they're relatively quick and easy to write, and they can give the reader ideas for new adventures. Write a stat block with a 50–100 word description for each creature, add its illustration, and you're finished. I found this was one of the fastest parts of the book to write.

I also cheated! Instead of creating my monsters first and then commissioning suitable artwork for them, I bought a selection of stock art and used it as inspiration for my bestiary. Not only did it give me some great ideas for new monsters, but it also significantly reduced my production costs.

You can also use this chapter to flesh out any major nonplayer characters in the setting.

EDITING AND PROOFREADING

Most word processors can spot superficial errors, such as spelling and grammar mistakes, and there are specialized tools like Grammarly and Hemingway Editor that can also improve the quality of your writing. But they are no substitute for an extra pair of human eyes.

A good editor is worth their weight in gold, and they should be one of your top priorities. They can spot problems with the organization and presentation of your writing, tightening up the wording to make it clear and readable. Some will also check your game mechanics.

If you can't afford to hire an editor, consider exchanging services with another publisher. Try not to rely on self-editing except as a last resort — it's remarkably difficult to spot your own mistakes!

PLAYTESTING AND FEEDBACK

It's essential that you playtest your products. This can identify problems with game mechanics (such as new Edges) and inconsistencies in the setting (such as plot holes). It's also a great way of promoting your game, so make sure you take photos of the sessions and share them online!

Try not to stick with your regular group all the time, either. If there's a nearby roleplaying society or your local gaming store holds events, use them to run games for strangers. If you have the chance to attend a game convention, use the opportunity to reach a wider audience (and network with other game designers at the same time).

If you've built up a fanbase with your releases, you may find other Game Masters are willing to run your products for their groups. It's always worth getting a fresh perspective on your work.

Make sure you have thick skin, though! Honest feedback can be brutal at times, but it's invaluable and should be encouraged.

Don't forget: the playtesters are the ones doing you a favor.

ARTWORK

Good art won't redeem a bad book, but bad art can sink a good product. Unless you're a skilled artist, you have four options: public domain, community content, stock art, or private commissions. You can also mix and match, but try to keep a consistent artistic style throughout your book.

PUBLIC DOMAIN ART

Some artwork is in the public domain, which means it's free, and you can do whatever you like with it. These illustrations are often low quality, however, and it can be difficult finding what you need. Some people use public domain photographs or computer-generated images instead, perhaps filtering them using Photoshop or GIMP, but it's difficult to produce good results.

Never assume that an image is in the public domain. Always check.

COMMUNITY CONTENT

If you're publishing through SWAG, you'll also have access to free artwork and other assets. These can be a great way to keep your costs down, but other SWAG publishers will be using the same assets, so try not to rely on them too much if you want your work to stand out.

STOCK ART

You can purchase stock art at a reasonable price, and many Aces make extensive use of it. Some stock art is remarkably good, and may originally have been a commission for another roleplaying game. There are usually restrictions on usage, however, and it can be difficult to find stock art to fit a specific need.

One way to keep costs down is to choose some inspirational illustrations early on, add them to your wish list, and design your setting around them. When you're working on the layout for your product, you can purchase artwork from your wish list and it will be a perfect fit for your setting.

If there's an artist you particularly like, you'll probably find they take commissions. This is a good way of



offering a book with a consistent style without breaking the bank, using commissioned artwork for important pieces and stock art for the rest.

COMMISSIONED ART

Private commissions are custom artwork, tailored to your needs. They are also the most expensive option. Make sure you describe clearly to the artist what it is you want, perhaps using a few other illustrations as examples for reference purposes.

The price can vary significantly depending on the artist and the piece. As a very rough guideline, expect to pay at least \$50, \$100 or \$200 for a quarter-, half- or full-page color illustration, and about half that for black and white. Particularly complex or detailed images can increase the price significantly. Likewise, if you want exclusive rights (so the artist can't resell the illustration as stock art), expect to pay more.

If your budget can only stretch to one commissioned piece, make it the cover. Covers are expensive (particularly wraparound ones), but they're also the first thing most people see. If you can't afford a custom cover, consider combining a stock cover template with a small commissioned piece, or create your own cover by combining different pieces of stock art.

You may also need to commission portrait images for your archetypes unless you can find stock art that matches the characters. Of course, you can always choose some illustrations first, and then design your character archetypes around them!

When designing PDFs to be read on a screen, use a lossless RGB file format like PNG for your images. If you plan to offer printed books, request your artwork in CMYK TIFF format, with 0.125" bleed for full- or half-page illustrations.

MAPS

A good map can prove invaluable, and it's likely to see a lot of use if your setting involves exploration or travel. Technically you could use public domain or stock art maps, but you're unlikely to find something suitable unless you set your campaign in a real-world location. There are also various map-making tools, but they're often difficult to use, or the results look very "samey."

If you can afford a private commission for your setting map, it's well worth the investment. It's also an expense you can recoup by selling print-on-demand poster maps — the map should be 12"×18", ideally without any critical details too close to the edges (so you can include a smaller map in your setting book, cropped to fit the ratio of your page size).

Offering a standalone PDF version of your map is also worth considering. If you use layers, the user can even hide and reveal different features on the map, such as travel routes, text labels, tribal territory, etc.

Some cartographers will also give advice about geography and topography, helping you lay out your world map in a logical fashion. Take them up on the offer if you get this opportunity!

WILD CARD SYMBOLS

Each setting uses a thematic symbol to indicate Wild Cards. It's generally better to use a vector image rather than a raster image, as it resizes better on the screen. If you don't need a multicolored Wild Card symbol, use a dingbat font, or create a custom font.

You can use tools such as Illustrator or Inkscape to create vector images and custom fonts. The Wild Card symbol is also useful when ordering custom Wild Dice, as you can use it to replace the "6" side! Custom Wild Dice are an excellent promotional giveaway for public games and conventions.

LAYOUT

Most word processors allow you to export your document as a PDF, but if you want a professional-looking product, you should be using a desktop publishing application. I recommend InDesign or Scribus as OBS (and the SWAG program) offer tutorials and templates for them.

After opening your desktop publishing application, you need to set up a template — choose your desired page size, create some master pages, and add some styles (ideally using a baseline grid, unless you're planning on single-column layout).

PAGE SIZE

Official Pinnacle *Savage Worlds* books are “graphic novel” size (6.625" × 10.25"), but if you're publishing through SWAG, you'll be limited to the OBS print-on-demand options, which only offer that size in softcover. Some Aces use 7"×10" instead, but if they don't use the same size for both softcover and hardcover, they'll have to do the layout work twice. These sizes are also considered “large” for printing cost purposes, even though you can't fit as much onto the page as you could with A4 or US Letter.

Another option is US Trade size (6" × 9"). This is considered “small” (black and white, or standard color) or “medium” (premium color) for printing cost purposes, and it works well with a single-column layout.

My personal preference is US Letter size (8.5" × 11"), as it gives me plenty of space for a two-column layout, and I can fit a lot of content onto each page, which reduces the production cost. One Sheets, archetypes, and character sheets usually use this format anyway, as they're designed for home printing, so it's convenient to have everything in the same size.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

It takes years to become a professional graphic designer, but it's still worth learning the basics, even if you're hiring someone else to do the layout work.

If you're not familiar with the fundamentals, I recommend reading *The Non-Designer's Design Book* by Robin Williams. It explains the four basic principles of “contrast” (make the elements on a page stand out from each other), “repetition” (repeat styles and images throughout the document to give it a consistent look), “alignment”



(visually align elements with each other) and “proximity” (related elements should be positioned close together). The book gives further advice about color schemes, typography, fonts, and more.

DIGITAL FEATURES

You can make your PDF easier to navigate through the use of links and bookmarks, and layers can also be used to add utility. For example, you might offer character archetypes for Novice, Seasoned and Veteran rank, with the viewer selecting the version as a layer. Likewise, a map can have overlays on different layers, allowing the Game Master to conceal unexplored regions.

FINISHING TOUGHES

After you’ve finished the layout, you may require additional artwork to balance some of the pages. If you only need a few generic spot illustrations, you can easily buy a bundle of stock art. Each chapter should start on the recto (right-hand) page, but if you want to avoid purchasing more full-page illustrations try adding a table instead — we gamers love rolling for random names, backgrounds, treasure, etc.!

You should also do a final proofread. As well as spelling and grammar, make sure you double-check the punctuation — and don’t forget *Savage Worlds* uses an en dash instead of a hyphen to indicate negative numbers. Other things to look for include widows and orphans, indentation (should be handled by your styles, but don’t indent the first paragraph), writer and artist credits, and of course copyright notices and legal disclaimers.

It’s also worth doing a final proofread over your game mechanics, particularly stat blocks. It’s surprising just how often people miscalculate Parry and Toughness, or incorrectly add up the skill points for an archetype.

There are also some common technical mistakes to watch out for, such as placing text frames out of sequence (this really confuses people who use screen readers, and also messes up copy and paste, as the order of selected text is not the same as it appears on the screen), or forgetting to embed some of the fonts (the PDF may look okay on your computer, but won’t look good for other people), or setting the resolution too high (you want at least 300 DPI for print-on-demand, but it produces large files, so for screen use I recommend 150 DPI).

But no matter how careful you are, there will invariably be some minor issues that slip through. So before you start printing your book, I recommend releasing the PDF version and give readers the chance to offer feedback.

PRINT-ON-DEMAND

Once you’ve finished and released your product, and fixed any problems, you may wish to offer a print-on-demand version. This involves preparing and uploading a separate print-ready PDF — you will need to remove the cover, change the image resolution, add bleed and a gutter margin, set the color space to CMYK, make sure the ink coverage doesn’t exceed 240%, and so on. OBS offers tutorials and templates for InDesign and Scribus, so make sure you follow them carefully.

If the margins are too narrow and you don’t want to redo the layout, a workaround is to make the bleed larger than necessary, then use a tool called jPDF Tweak to shrink the PDF down to the desired page size.

Before you start selling your book, you will have to order a proof print. Make sure you check the proof carefully, as unexpected problems will often occur. If you plan to offer different printing options (such as black and white, standard color or premium color) in softcover and

hardcover, check them all before you start selling the book. It's usually best not to overload the customer with too many choices though.

The same approach applies to print-on-demand cards. Once again, OBS offers templates and instructions, and you can create and upload your Action or Adventure Deck as a print-ready PDF. You also have the option of adding a tuck box, although this will increase the production cost.

MARKETING AND NETWORKING

Nobody can work in a vacuum, and you shouldn't try to do everything yourself. Focus on your strengths and find other people to handle the things you aren't able or willing to do yourself.

If you don't yet feel confident enough to self-publish, consider freelancing for other publishers. This is a great way to hone your skills, gives valuable insight into the way other publishers work, and provides an excellent opportunity to network with other game designers. It also gets your name out there and you can use the money to fund your own projects.

Even if you do decide to jump straight into self-publishing, don't completely dismiss the possibility of collaborative projects. If you hire a well-known writer to create an adventure, it'll draw your setting to the attention of their fans and followers. You could even exchange services with another publisher, perhaps writing One Sheets for each other.

When it comes to promoting products, there are many options. You can release Actual Play videos, run games at conventions and local gaming stores, ask podcast hosts if they're interested

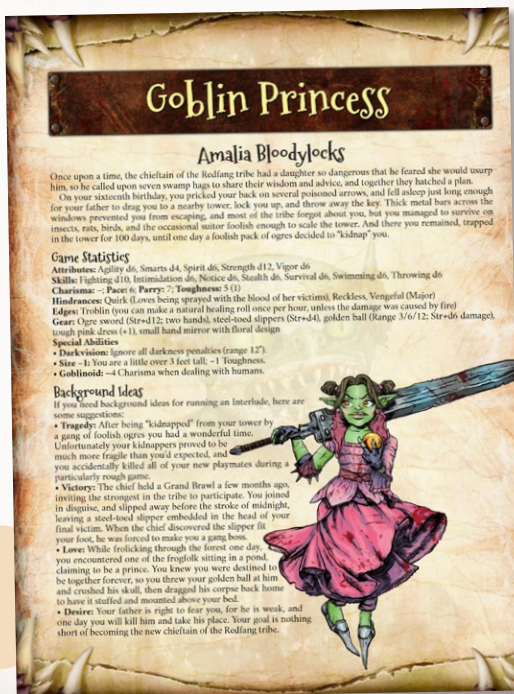
One of Richard's Archetypes for Saga of the Goblin Horde, available at DriveThruRPG.com.

in interviewing you, send free copies to game reviewers, submit your work to the ENnie Awards and other contests, etc. OBS also offers various marketing tools, such as banners and special deals.

But don't forget to release frequent updates, once you've published your book! Even the occasional blog post or One Sheet can keep your product in the public eye, and this is very important — don't just release your setting and then move on, or it will fade into obscurity. You want to keep your fanbase keen while attracting newcomers, and this requires active effort.

PRICING

If you're not sure how to price your releases, use products from other publishers as a rough guideline. Pay-What-You-Want (PWYW) may also be worth considering, particularly while you're trying to establish yourself — it's more of a marketing strategy than a sales strategy, but it will reach a wider audience than a fixed price, while still giving you the opportunity to recoup your expenses.



THE LONG GAME

—BY SHANE HENSLEY

Whether you focus on publishing your game or running it at home for your friends, you may occasionally have a campaign that runs for years. Maybe even decades.

Pinnacle has several worlds that have done just that, particularly *Deadlands the Weird West*. How does one manage a game that runs for so long, involves dozens of expansions, hundreds of thousands of players and their perceptions of it, and most importantly, changes in game industry practices and even social moods?

I've told the story of *Deadlands* creation many times, but I'll briefly repeat it here to set the stage for the rest of this conversation. On the long drive back from GenCon one year I couldn't get the image of the latest White Wolf magazine cover out of my mind. It was a Brom piece depicting an undead Confederate soldier (a vampire, though I didn't know it at the time). As I drove through the long night that image transformed into a Southwestern Boot Hill with a hand reaching up dramatically from a rocky grave. I kept thinking, "What would make someone fight their way back from death?" True love, of course. Or some desperate cause, or maybe some unresolved task they felt must be completed?

Then I started to think about *how* that cowboy could come back from the dead. How could his muscles move without neurons to fire? How could he think without a heart to pump blood and oxygen to the brain? Magic, of course. But what kind?

I was always fascinated by Christopher Marlow's *Doctor Faustus* and "deals with the devil." Power at a cost. That made sense. So what kind of deal had our hero made that could animate his corpse — even give



him powers to continue whatever task he felt compelled to complete? Sticking a demon inside him seemed the perfect choice. It had “magic mojo” to give him ambulation and powers, and could wrestle with him for control to check the “power comes with a price” box.

The world of *Deadlands* spun out from there, giving rise to hucksters, mad scientists, ghost rock, the Great Maze, the City o’ Gloom, and so many other ideas that have now become part of the setting.

When we released it to the public, I figured we’d sell a few thousand copies over a few years and that’d be it. In fact, that’s why I already had *Hell on Earth* in mind when we launched the game, and why I was able to hide clues to that possible fate in the book.

Fate intervened of course and *Deadlands* became an instant hit. That sounds great, and it is, but managing success is often far more difficult than managing failure.

Here’s some of what I learned over the next twenty years overseeing the line.

THE RULES

The original rules for *Deadlands* (now called *Deadlands Classic*) share some concepts in common with *Savage Worlds*. Both games use all the usual dice (d4 through d12 and rarely d20), Aces, and taking the highest of however many dice you rolled.

In 1996, a relatively “heavy” game system was perfectly acceptable, and it replicated *The Outlaw Josey Wales* experience nicely where every bullet felt “chunky” and lethal. As things got more complicated, however, and especially once we introduced the sequel, *Hell on Earth*, the system was just too slow and started getting in the way of the story.

We had already “slimmed down” the system for our *Deadlands* miniatures game, *The Great Rail Wars*, and that had been super successful for us, so some

of our team started experimenting with using it as a roleplaying game as well.

By 2003, a modified *Great Rail Wars* became the first edition of *Savage Worlds*, a rule system that was a much better fit for gamers of that era.

EVOLVING RULES

A few modifications to *Savage Worlds* were made between 2003 and 2017, but not many. The core has always been solid, and has remained essentially unchanged since the beginning.

Blessed with a solid foundation, we began experimenting with the subsystems that came in handy for certain types of stories and tropes, like Interludes.

To illustrate the point, let me tell you how these came about. Interludes were inspired by three sources. The first was the incredible *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

I thought about those epic journeys through the freezing mountains, stinking bogs, and green forests, and tried to think of ways to make the *game* experience as interesting as it was in the films. Sure, you can intersperse the journeys with encounters, but those are just more fights. I was looking for something else but couldn’t quite put my finger on it.

Then I ran a *50 Fathoms* adventure for some friends in California I called “Small Talk.” The conceit was that a crew of pirates were traveling across a dangerous island to rescue their kidnapped captain. Along the way, they were prompted to tell stories that defined him — and their characters. (The twist was that the captain had betrayed them and every tall tale they told just made him more powerful for the final encounter!).

The third source of inspiration was my own son, Ronan. I ran games for my kids a lot when they were growing up, and Ronan would always say the wildest things when his big barbarian would attack. Once, when attacked by a horde

of goblins, he wanted to pick up a goblin, swing it around by its feet, and knock out all the other goblins. You could break that down, start with a grapple, treat the goblin as an Improvised Weapon, etc., but what I realized in that moment was that I could also just say “Yeah! That’s awesome! Roll your Fighting!” He rolled, I treated it as a Sweep, and he caused damage to the goblins surrounding his character. His *description* didn’t really matter from a game system point of view, but it meant the *world* to him narratively.

Somewhere between those experiences it became obvious that with creative players, both narrative and mechanical rules could be married into something that was greater than the sum of their parts.

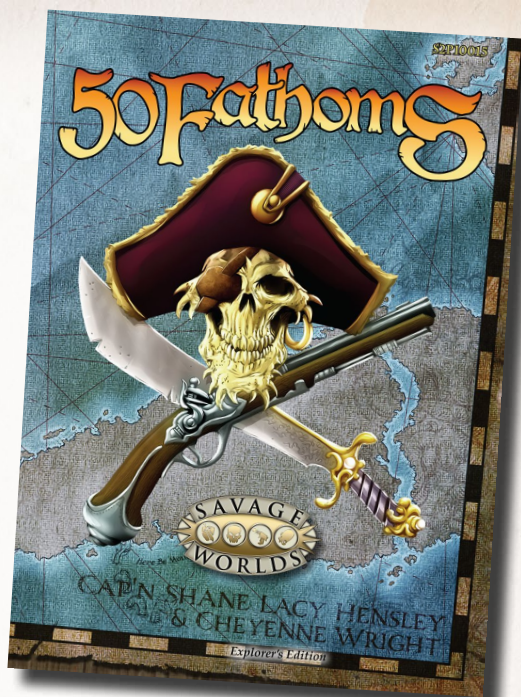
Other benefits of this approach quickly emerged. Take the epic journey, for example. The players could discuss clever ways to surmount obstacles *and* insert their *own* stories about their heroes’ backstories along the way — something they were always trying to do but found difficult given the usual campaign flow.

From here it became easier to think about inserting other narrative ideas into *Savage Worlds*. Games like *Fate* were already popular because of their narrative elements, and embracing that *where it fit* into *Savage Worlds* came very naturally.

I run most of my games very narratively anyway, but like to break out the minis and get tactical when it’s really important or exciting.

In the Adventure Edition, players can describe the most imaginative moves during a chase, for example, and the GM can simply map that to one of the maneuvers to make it work within the system.

The new Test and Support rules do the same thing, allowing players to *describe* whatever they want and having an easy systemic way to express it in the game.



SOCIAL CHANGE

Back to *Deadlands*. Something that was very important to me right from the beginning was that women and minorities felt empowered to play the game. My wife has always been part of our group, as have several of my friends’ wives. The character on the cover of our gunslingers book, *Law Dogs*, way back in 1997, was a lady sheriff.

I also served in the military with people of all backgrounds and wanted them to feel comfortable at the table. I wanted *everyone* to feel like Clint Eastwood’s *Man with No Name* or whatever trope they were going for without having to worry about their ethnicity, sexual preference, or religion.

To that end, women and minorities hold positions of power in the Weird West. We don’t *talk* about it much — that feels like self-congratulatory pandering. We prefer to just make it part of the world and *show* it.

We take a similar approach to slavery in *Deadlands*. We don’t erase it, we just focus elsewhere because we don’t want players or Game Masters to have to bring that kind of ugliness into their entertainment.

Of course players can bring it into their *home* games in whatever way they're comfortable, and we think that's best.

The same goes with Native Americans. Instead of dwelling on the historical tragedy we prefer empowerment. That's why the Sioux Nations and Coyote Confederation are two of the most powerful entities in the game.

These kinds of issues are constantly on our minds as we continue to explore the Weird West, a time of both epic heroes and terrible social tragedy. Sometimes we get it wrong, more often I *think* we get it right, but we're always learning and listening.

TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

The rapid change in technology became incredibly apparent when we started work on *Deadlands Hell on Earth Reloaded*. Data recorders in the 1998 edition, for example, envisioned a future (2084) where you record one hour of audio or video, but not both. Here in 2018 our phones can record hours of audio and video in High Definition!

We could have left this alone and made it a conceit of the setting — it's a 1990s view of the future rather than a contemporary one — but we felt that would be frustrating to our players when they couldn't do things that even basic technology can do today. So we simply changed it, and that's probably a lesson you want to embrace in your world as well if this becomes an issue. You can simple "retcon" it, introduce a "revolutionary technological jump," or just talk honestly to the players and tell them it's time to update tech to match modern expectations.

THE STORY

Perhaps the greatest challenge to keeping *Deadlands* fresh after two decades has been introducing big new stories and villains, resolving them, and then introducing *new* stories and villains.

For the first decade we focused mostly on regional events. We'd write the *Great Maze* sourcebook, for example, and include an adventure for it inside.

Later we created series of adventures that took posses around the Weird West and introduced new powerful McGuffins and villains, as we did in the *Fortress of Fear* trilogy.

As the Servitors grew in stature, power, and real-world popularity, it was time to tell their stories — including their defeat — in full-length Plot Point Campaigns dedicated to each. These massive adventures took parties all over the Weird West and eventually allowed them to battle Grimme, Raven, Stone, and finally Dr. Hellstromme. Some were defeated for good while some were just set back for a while, but each story had a major impact on the world. The City of Lost Angels disappeared, the Sioux Nations lost technology, the Rangers and Agents formed the Twilight Legion, and a number of long-running featured heroes like Texas Ranger Hank Ketchum bit the dust despite the posse's best efforts.

Telling all those tales kept us and our audience busy for the last twenty years. If your creation runs that long, you'll have to do much the same.

TIMELINES AND HISTORY

If you're running or publishing a long-term fantasy campaign, it's fairly easy to keep advancing the date with no real repercussions. That's not so in a historical game like *Deadlands* where the period of the "Wild West" ends at about the turn of the century. The original story started in 1876 and we're up to 1882 or so now, so we've got to be very careful about how fast we advance the timeline.

You'll need to do the same if your setting is historical, or keep the date nebulous so the GM can set them whenever she wants.

ANECDOTES

The rest of this book is a collection of smaller articles by experienced players and Game Masters of *Savage Worlds*. Perhaps some of their many experiences will trigger an idea for your endless adventures to come.

THE ART OF THE CELEBRITY CON GAME

—by Ed Wettermann,
co-creator of East Texas University

A few years ago I was a guest at Chupacabracon in Austin. The Con organizers asked me if I would run a Celebrity Game to raise money for a good cause. “Absolutely,” I answered and set about creating a Celebrity Game that would include not just everyone at the table, but the audience as well. I had seen some of these games before, and while they were fun to watch, I really wanted a more interactive experience for everyone. If you are a fan boy like me, you want to not just see and listen to the awesome creators of our gaming passions, but have that personal interaction with them as well.

The problem was how to accomplish running an interactive game for charity that would be Fast, Furious, and Fun for all?

First, I knew the game I wanted to run: *Chickens in the Mist*. A real TPK (total party killer) that usually ended with everyone laughing and dying horrible deaths at the mercy of the beaks and talons of giant, mutant chickens far out in East Texas where no one could hear you scream!

The second issue, and for me the most important, was how to interact constantly with the audience, while raising money for the charity, and hopefully running an entertaining game. It takes showmanship, knowledge of the rules, and lots of caffeine. Seriously, this is one of the most draining pursuits you can do for four hours. Keep that energy level up and keep the game moving and interactive. This type of thing is a game, but it’s also a performance and the celebrities’ participation and willingness to role-play is vital to the success of the event.

I believe *Savage Worlds* is the perfect game system for this. I’ve run several of these now and each has been highly successful and fun for all. Here are my recommendations to any Con or Game Master looking to run a fun Celebrity Game for charity.

MAKE IT VISUALLY STIMULATING

With the help of my 12 to Midnight comrades and Ronnie Walton, we designed a Lego world of chickens, trucks, and trees. Shane Hensley taught me that the look of a table is important to the feel of the table. I admit this is my weakest aspect as a Game Master, but I knew this set up would be awesome and make for some great photo opportunities as well. We also prepared colorful character sheets with art and these were laid out on the table before the game and the audience was invited to peruse them before the event.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT GAME

To have a successful game requires detailed planning and coordination by the Game Master and con coordinators. Choose a time that maximizes participation and doesn't take away from the best of the con gaming schedule. A Thursday or Friday night allows everyone to play in

their own games on Saturday as this is usually the biggest game day of any con.

I also recommend a four hour slot. Be careful to choose a game that can be played to completion in the four hour slot as stopping a game before reaching a satisfying conclusion is not fun for the players or the audience. If a game is too short, they might feel unsatisfied. As the Game Master you must keep things moving and engage everyone in the room, all while thinking quickly on your feet.

Choose an adventure with lots of action, danger, and if possible, funny with great plot twists and character interaction. Be different and be willing to go outside the box. For me, it was college kids investigating an illegal cock-fighting ring way out in the rural areas of Golan County where they encounter giant, mutant chickens. Part bug hunt, part mystery, part chicken-run, and as you can imagine, lots of "adult oriented" jokes (which was appropriate for that particular audience).



Finally, decide on how many celebrity participants you will invite to the game. I recommend four to five with an extra seat to be auctioned off before the game so an audience member can sit in and play with the designers. Choose folks who have great imaginations and personalities and are not afraid to interact and play in-character situations so that the game is truly entertaining for all.

BE PREPARED

Have pregenerated characters that are interesting and different to encourage roleplaying. Make sure each character is useful in the game, as well. Select the right skills, Edges, and Hindrances that fit the story and mood of the room.

You should also know the adventure you're running so well you can modify and move it along as necessary to get to the conclusion in the time provided.

Bring lots and lots of Bennies to the game and extra dice. I recommend a set of extra-large dice if possible (I have a set of massive foam dice as big as bowling balls the audience *loves* to roll).

Have all your game accessories and a few copies of the rule book handy in case anyone needs to look something up, but try to avoid that as much as possible since rules should take somewhat of a backseat toward entertaining.

ROOM SETUP

This type of game requires a private room with enough space for the game table, the participants, and most importantly the audience. The best set up is a game "in the round" where the game table and players are in the center of the room and the audience sits around them.

As this is difficult, most of the games I've been involved in have the game table across the front of the room with the celebrity players facing the audience sitting on one side of the table. The audience then sits like they would for a typical gaming panel.

It's important to have space between the table and the audience for the Game Master to walk around and be interactive with every player and audience member (never sit!), so have aisles and space around the seating area. Remember, the Game Master is like an actor on stage and you need to work the audience and keep the game moving.

AUDIENCE BUY IN

Make sure the convention advertises and pushes the game if it's raising money for charity. Gamers at Cons usually schedule everything in advance to have the best gaming experiences they can. One seat should be auctioned off to the highest bidder either before the Con or ten minutes or so before the game.

Remind everyone that this is for a worthy cause and they get to play a game with some of their favorite designers and writers.

I also allow the audience to bid on the character sheets and the highest bidders can give their chosen character to their chosen designer. This gets really fun in East Texas University where there's always a cheerleader character and it's usually played by a guest with great fun and intention.

PLAYER INTRODUCTIONS

Prepare an information card for you to read for every celebrity playing, including any audience members who purchased a seat. A quick blurb about who they are, what they've done and recent projects. Keep it simple and quick but allow for some interaction between the players and the audience.

Next, work the audience. Explain to them how the game is going to work, that it's meant to be interactive, that they can provide Bennies for the Game Master or the players, purchase rerolls, save heroes from death, or whatever else you feel is appropriate (more on

this below). Remind them of the charity you're ultimately playing for and get set to have some fun!

GAMING ASSISTANTS

Be sure to have one to two assistants to collect money, give out and take up Bennies, etc. It takes more than just a Game Master to pull all this off and these assistants are invaluable to keeping the game moving.

Make sure they know the basics of the adventure as well, and encourage them to give you ideas if something springs to mind. Just make sure they have a good sense of when to jump in and when to let you keep things moving along.

Your assistants can also help you keep an eye on anyone who seems unhappy or passed over. While the players discuss a new plan, for example, your helpers might be able to point out that the gal who bid for a surprise early on hasn't seen it play out yet.

BENNIE ECONOMY

Before the game starts, introduce the Benny economy and allow them to be purchased in advance. A dollar a Benny is great.

How do they work? In my games, the player characters don't receive any Bennies (though the Game Master does). They're completely dependent on the audience for them.

Otherwise, Bennies can be used just as they are in the *Savage Worlds* rulebook, but it's up to the audience to decide who gets them! Of course the players may beg the audience for help and this makes for some great entertainment and interaction.

As the Game Master, you can also ask the audience to give you Bennies as well. Play up the Game Master versus the players angle as this "conflict" leads to great fun when the audience takes sides and leads to more Bennies being purchased and spent.



WORK THE ROOM

The Game Master is the “carnival barker.” The success of the game depends on you making certain everyone has a great time. Don’t be afraid to question the audience, ask for assistance with rulings, let them roll damage (especially if you have giant dice), or even a “should I add another giant mutant chicken here?” type question.

Have fun, make some laughs, and include everyone as much as possible, especially the shy folks who might get overlooked otherwise.

Remember to project your voice to be easily heard by everyone in the room. If a microphone with a speaker is available, use it, and be careful to enunciate properly so everyone can understand you.

BUILDING AND CONCLUSION

The hardest part of running this type of event is keeping to the time allotted and completing the adventure. This often means you must be willing to jump

past encounters, add to them when the audience seems particularly engaged, or even move to the conclusion when there’s less than thirty minutes left. (It’s nice to have a little Q&A time at the end as well.)

This takes some skill and the assistants should help the Game Master keep up with the time available. Also, be willing to provide for at least a ten minute break at the half-way mark and make certain to have water or something to drink handy for yourself and the players.

When the game finally comes to a conclusion remember to thank all the participants, but especially the audience for their time and money for the cause.

After running the event you will be exhausted. This is a normal and expected reaction to being on stage for four hours of extemporaneous, entertaining expository. So my final piece of advice is not to plan on running any other game that evening. Take care of yourself and most importantly, keep it Fast, Furious, and Fun for all.



A FOUNDATION OF CRUNCH

—By Shane Hensley

It was a *Weird Wars Rome* game where I truly understood why I love having crunchy rules at the foundation of *Savage Worlds* even though I run the *vast* majority of my games very fast and loose.

It happened at GenghisCon or Tacticon, I can't remember which. (The Rocky Mountain Savages run dozens of *Savage Worlds* games at these two conventions and if you ever get a chance to attend you absolutely should!).

Long-time *Savage Worlds* Game Master Neal Hyde ran the adventure. Our legionaries were stationed in Greece. It was a dry posting with little action — until a massive earthquake struck. We survived that, then went on a tour of the villages under our protection to check on the damage. The destruction was terrible. There were bodies and ruined buildings everywhere we went.

Further up the mountain from our outpost, now several days since the earthquake, we found the villagers missing entirely. Sometimes we found tracks where they'd run from something but they just vanished mid-trail. My first thought was that it was harpies. The earthquake had upset their mountain aeries and driven them to attack the locals.

Eventually we discovered a different kind of trail — occasional dropped items or drops of blood that led to a cavern in the volcano. The antagonists weren't harpies — they were ancient snake people released from the depths of the earth by the quake! Worse, they were led by an ancient and gargantuan dragon-like being that rose up from a fiery crevasse!

Neal Hyde gave one of the best speeches I ever heard from a bad guy. The dragon

looked us at us and said something to the effect of: "I have awakened...join me and I shall reward you beyond your wildest dreams. Resist and I shall grind your bones into dust."

I was playing the young idealistic legionary from our archetypes and told the dragon we'd never join him... while the *decanus* (sergeant) and another character rubbed their chins and considered it!

The dragon roared at me. "I was old when Atlantis was young, boy! With but a breath I can melt that iron armor you wear and the flesh beneath it!"

SHIELD WALL!

Now I'll get to the relevant part of this tale. Promise. The serpent people charged us while the dragon urged them on, watching to see which of us might break before he settled matters himself. We had been playing fast and loose up to that point, concentrating on roleplaying with the locals and each other and solving the mystery. Now Neal broke out the miniatures and a cool full color map of a volcano floor.

The *Weird Wars Rome* Edges are designed to make the characters feel like legionaries, especially as compared to warriors from a swords and sorcery game in armor of a similar value. All of us had tower shields and the Shield Wall Edge, both of which increased our Parry considerably when we stood together in a line.

That's when it clicked. The serpent warriors were tough fighters, but using the rules, standing there side by side on the battlemat and trusting in our Edges the way our *characters* would trust their training, was illuminating. The serpents were like the barbarian hordes the shield and Edge were meant to protect against, and they did just that. We stood side by side for many rounds before the cheatin' dragon finally intervened and *puppeted* one of us (dirty pool, Neal!).

Eventually, we were doomed. My character threw Sara Martinez's unconscious Greek healer over his shoulder, looked at his buddy — the massive brute archetype (Chris Martinez, Sara's husband) — and told him to "Hold them as long as you can..." My legionary then ran for the narrow cave entrance and escaped while Chris' character died saving us. (Rocky Mountain Savage co-founder Christopher Landauer died nobly in that cave as well.)

It was an epic game that I remember many years afterward. Great GM, great players, and incredible atmosphere.

USING THE GAME

It was some time later when I realized what had happened at the "game design" level. We knew the rules and we knew the strengths of our characters' Edges. We had used them to hold off a horde of very powerful foes, and might have even won the fight if not for that dang dragon!

It was never a sure thing, though, and that's where the secret sauce came from. Had we done this more narratively, we wouldn't have had the same tension. We probably would have narrated a valiant stand that ended in death, running away, or of course, victory, and it would have been a good story, but it wouldn't have been the same as playing it out... as "earning" what little triumph we managed at the cost of several player character's lives.

Instead, we believed we could hold and had to prove it — or die there in that cave. When things fell apart, we had to use every rule we could to get our healer out of the cave while the rest sacrificed themselves. The big brute, I recall, used Sweep to Shake a couple of the serpent people next to me so I could flee without them getting their free attacks, which almost certainly would have finished me.

Everything worked like it was supposed to, and it was *fair* because the rules were

there for everyone to see. We knew the odds and the risks and took our chances.

We *didn't* break down into tactical combat with a few earlier encounters. We chased off some angry villagers and surly looters with a few quick rolls and moved on. But when we needed the power of the full system, it was there and served us well.

RUNNING THE BIG GAME

—By Sean Patrick Fannon

One of my claims to fame — something that frequently invokes equal parts incredulity and admiration — is running the Big Game at conventions and for special occasions. What started as an inability to say no to anyone who really wanted to play with me became a developed reputation for running large tables with lots of things happening, often as a featured event at a convention, charity event, or as a celebration of gathering many old friends together.

Savage Worlds is one of my favorite systems as much for its utility in running these events as all the other reasons. Recent developments with the system — Support Rolls, Dramatic Tasks, and Quick Encounters — make it even more appealing.

Over the years, I've developed techniques and approaches to running a Big Game.

THE BIG GAME

For purposes of this discussion, the Big Game is one table (or, more likely a couple or more tables put together) with anywhere from 8 to 16 players. There is only one Game Master, and everyone playing is generally engaged with the story in the same way a more typical RPG session works.



To many GMs and players, this seems like a bad idea (or even a nightmare), but there are ways to make it work so it's exciting, fun, and keeps moving. A lot of it comes down to the Game Master having (and maintaining) the right attitude and philosophy about things.

SET EXPECTATIONS

Right up front, you'll want to chat with all of the players about how things are going to go, and more importantly, how they will need to help you make this thing work. This means folks paying attention, not delving off down "bunny trails" of distractions or turning the table into a long standup comedy routine in-the-round.

I have a "Ladies and Gentlemen" rule when I say that phrase, my players are expected to drop whatever side chats they are involved in and give me their full attention. I explain this up front as a way they can help me keep the game going and help us reach a satisfying conclusion that was fun for everyone. Similar table

rules that you come up with to keep the game moving and organized should be explained before the game gets underway.

Another very important concept to get across is that every player at a Big Game table needs to be ready to go the moment it's their turn to act. If they are unsure about what to do, they should go on Hold (whether in actual combat rounds or just going around the table) and work out what they want to do. Make sure they know it's up to them to let you know when they are ready to step in and act.

Some Game Masters are comfortable with players "pre-rolling" between turns, while others prefer rolls at the time of action. Make certain your players know which you want to avoid any frustrations later.

KEEP YOUR ENERGY UP

Big Games run on social energy; folks are far more willing to sacrifice the face time they'd get at a normal table if they can feel the excitement and enthusiasm of the experience being shared around the table. This depends primarily on you

staying up and engaged with everyone throughout the game.

As much as you can manage, stay on your feet. Be expressive with hands and voice. Move around a bit, as folks subconsciously feel there's more going on if you're moving.

Minimize the amount of time you have to engage with only a subset of the players, and even when you must do this, treat everyone else at the table as the audience for the scene. Big Games are no place for "secret meeting" scenes; make every encounter and moment something to be witnessed and enjoyed, even if the players must treat some things as "meta knowledge" their characters cannot interact with.

Better still to design things so that as many players as possible may be involved with, or at least knowledgeable about what's happening. This is one of the reasons why I prefer games that have either technological or supernatural (magic/psionic) means for everyone to communicate.

Take brief breaks if you need them in order to regain energy and focus. Getting everyone else up from the table is also a good idea, as they stretch their legs and refocus their attention.

LINEAR WITHOUT RAILS

A lot of experienced gamers discount "gaming on the rails," referring to too-linear plots and scenarios that restrict player choice. In absolute terms, this is problematic in any RPG experience. However, in Big Games, a certain amount of linearity is pretty much essential for getting anywhere at all within the time allotted.

Those who run convention scenarios already know this; you have three-to-four hours, typically, to get through the experience, which inevitably means some amount of direction on the part of the GM to help the players reach a satisfying conclusion to the game. The

same principle applies to a Big Game, where each player represents a complex moving part that can seriously steer the game away from the goal without some semblance of plot direction.

The trick, of course, is to point towards a goal and the challenges necessary to overcome to reach it without simply sticking the characters into a cart and moving along the rails to the end.

I highly recommend very mission-driven scenarios with clearly-defined goals and interfering challenges. The players work out how best to get to the goal, as well as how to divide and apply their strengths towards the various tasks, giving them a strong sense of agency in the process. So long as they also have a sense of impending consequences if they don't keep moving towards the goal, you can have a complete and complex experience that is linear without feeling too railroaded.

ROUND AND ROUND

As in any gaming group, there are those who are good at gaining (and keeping) attention on their character and actions, while there are other players who tend to sit back and see if and when they'll be able to contribute. In less optimal groups, this can evolve into a real problem; the louder alpha players dominate the table and less-confrontational or aggressive players quietly resent being left out.

In the Big Game, you must keep going around the table, constantly seeking input from every player at the key stages. You may have to actively set scenes, establishing a concentrated bit of roleplaying and interaction with all in the scene, then declare a "cut" that takes the attention to other players.

Lifeguards at large pools and aquatic parks are trained to constantly move around the space, using a pointing finger to intentionally direct their attention over every section where people may be. In this

way, they ensure their attention moves to each patron, seeing to their safety.

The same philosophy is easily applied to a large group of players in a Big Game. You must be mindful of every participant, going “round and round” the table or gaming space to ensure you keep everyone engaged and invested in their part of the action and story.

ENCOURAGE TEAM-UPS

Many times in standard games, individual heroes might split up to take on specific tasks — investigations, technical challenges, sneaking into an enemy stronghold, interviewing important information sources, and so on. These can be great opportunities for specialists to show off their specific sets of skills within the story.

In the Big Game, you’re almost certain to have numerous characters with overlapping skill sets and talents. Rather than allow this to become a competition to determine who is the best hacker, thief, interrogator, or whatever, you need to actively encourage team-ups among similarly-capable heroes to handle various tasks. The Support roll rules really help here; the players can work out who has the best capacity to handle the primary roll for the task, while others can creatively work out what they’re doing to increase their chances for success.

Though you have to keep things moving in the time you have allotted, never move so fast through this that you take away each person’s individual opportunity to shine within the scene, whether they’re making the core roll or a Support roll. You should encourage a concise description (something to bring up early on, in the Set Expectations phase described above), but allow for some pizzazz within the narrative to really make that moment shine for each player.

NARRATIVE ABSTRACTIONS FOR THE WIN

Hand-in-hand with everything shared previously, Big Games benefit greatly from using as much narrative abstraction (rather than precise, tactical resolutions) as possible. A single skill roll (especially one enhanced by Support rolls) can and should represent a broad range of activity — the Montage, if you will, we often see in action-adventure and thriller media.

Where players are comfortable and “get it,” let them run with the narrative. Where they get flustered and are unsure of how to best describe the action, feel free to step in and provide your own take on the scene, helping them see their character and actions in the best light. After a couple of times doing this, you may discover some players have the light bulb go off and are able to take it up from there.

Savage Worlds players appreciate the elegance of the tactical combat and resolution rules, and many will not feel like they are playing the game they love if some of that is not present even in a Big Game.

The trick is to do “set pieces” that bring out those rules at key moments, without damaging the pace through the rest of the experience by never straying from them. This is, in fact, why you have rules like Dramatic Tasks, Mass Battles, Interludes, Social Conflict, and especially Quick Encounters in this latest version of the *Savage Worlds* rules. Gaming grows and evolves, incorporating different techniques and approaches to allow for lots of ways to present different stages of a story, and SW beautifully represents this evolution.

In the Big Game, the more scenes you can relegate to Quick Encounters, the more opportunity you provide for satisfying (and, yes, crunchy) player-facing engagement with the vast scope of your epic story. Save the more intricate,

tactical, round-by-round encounters for the key moments; almost always, this means the grand finale against the main opposition. In order to make sure you have enough time to effectively run that last battle, you need to rely on narrative abstractions to handle a lot of the action beforehand.

MULTIPLE TASKS FOR THE FINALE

A single mega-villain for the grand finale is a common go-to for most GMs running epic events, but it's not the right call for a Big Game like this. Everyone wants in on the final act, and almost everyone will want a piece of the action. If there's only one viable target for them all to focus on, either the Game Master must employ a foe so ridiculously powerful, the entire experience is an exercise in frustration until someone gets their dice to explode, or the villain drops within seconds of their devastating monologue (delivered as the heroes arrive for the final fight).

There are some exceptions where you can make this work — a Gargantuan monster, complete with a total of six Wounds, stomping around and requiring the heroes to figure out what to use to stop it can make for a thrilling final act in a Big Game.

Generally, however, you're going to want to employ a set of final challenges and major foes to be dealt with in order to ensure everyone has a strong part to play in the grand finale. I tend to go with one challenge and/or Wild Card for every two-to-four heroes in the game. Hopefully, they've figured out who will be best at handling what and team up accordingly.

For example, Professor Mortis is about to launch a necro-virus from his secret lab in the Alps. The countdown has begun, and in order to cover his tracks, he's also triggered an avalanche machine to rain destruction down upon the villages below. The unfrozen Viking,

Tiwaz, and the fiery demolitions expert, Backdraft, are on hand to hold up the heroes, along with the Professor's two Uber-WASP bodyguards. Some of the heroes will have to find and deactivate the avalanche machine (a Dramatic Task); some will need to stop the missiles (another Dramatic Task); the rest might split up, taking on Tiwaz, Backdraft, and the WASPs as they try to catch and capture the Professor.

Oh, one more thing — take it easy with the Extras. It may seem like a great idea to put giant hordes of Extras between the heroes and their final tasks, but after a very short while, it can feel like an un-entertaining grind. In a typically-sized group, you have the time to make each Extra takedown more interesting and cinematic; with a Big Game, you have to blow through them fast, and it gets tedious in very short order.

THE BIG EPIC GAME

I also run something I call the Big Epic Game, which involves even more players, multiple tables, Table Captains (effectively co-GMs who also get to play characters), and “enhanced” use of Quick Encounters (using the Staged elements) at each table. We ran one of these at Genghis Con 2018 (in Denver), and it was a tremendous success. *Savage Worlds* — especially this latest version — really lends itself to structured-yet-narrative epic experiences.

DESIGNING A SAVAGE INVESTIGATION

—By John Goff

As the author of *Deadlands Noir*, it's probably no surprise one of my favorite types of scenarios to run is one featuring an investigation of some kind. Finding clues and following up on leads allows a Game Master to create a sense of both



building tension and excitement as the players get closer to solving the mystery at hand.

Unfortunately, nearly everyone I've gamed with who's run an investigative adventure has a story about how the entire plot was nearly derailed by a character failing a check to just find a critical piece of the puzzle.

Ideally, the characters find all the clues necessary to solve the mystery so the real work is piecing them together. Unfortunately, we often tend to reduce non-combat endeavors to simple success-or-failure skill rolls. And likewise, that often means characters fail to find a vital connection. This leaves the GM scrambling to find a way to move the adventure forward, and likely the players frustrated.

It's not unlike a dungeon crawl where the party just can't make the necessary

roll to discover the crucial secret door. They end up stuck in a 10' × 10' room with no way to move forward.

Fortunately, there are a number of tricks a GM can use to prevent an investigation from dead-ending for her or her players.

BUILD FROM THE BACK

The first thing I recommend is looking at your mystery. Identify what clues must be found to get the players from the initial investigation to the solution. It's great to have additional ones to flesh out the story, but it's likely some are going to be absolutely vital.

Personally, I like to start with the end and work back. What's the final thing that's going to lead the players to the conclusion? Once I've figured that one out, I decide what brings them to that piece of information, and so on until I work my way all the way back to the

point where the players are introduced to the mystery.

Think of it like designing a maze, or building a flow chart in reverse. Once you've got the most important, correct route planned out, you can add the branches — and most importantly you know what the players have to know to solve the adventure.

WORK WITH THE PLAYERS

Not everyone who enjoys a mystery is Hercule Poirot, and not everyone who makes a detective character is Sherlock Holmes. We don't require the player who has an ace pilot to actually fly a starship in real life, so we shouldn't require the one playing the streetwise gumshoe to understand all the fine points of conducting a scene evaluation.

A good rule of thumb I've heard is to make sure there are three ways for characters to find any piece of necessary information. If they need to find evidence a serial killer is on the loose, for example, they might uncover it in old police reports, newspaper archives, or a victim's journal. And if they think to look in all three places, it just serves to reinforce the theory.

Even better, ride that train of thought a few more stops down the line. One of the great things about tabletop roleplaying games is they're effectively open worlds. There are nearly infinite approaches open to a group — and you as the GM can't prepare for all of them ahead of time. So if the players aren't looking in the places expected, make the information available regardless of where they search for it.

Let's say you planned only for the three options above, but the players haven't keyed to the idea of a serial killer. Instead of digging into archives for past crimes, the detectives decide they'll interview the neighbors of the victim. That's the perfect opportunity to have one of the neighbors happen to have noticed a connection to

a similar crime a few years back, thus putting the team on the right track.

REWARD SMART PLAY

One of the traps of running a mystery is hoarding information — even I fall into this after decades of practice sometimes. I convince myself information has value — it does — and that the players will only recognize it if they have to work to earn it. And in a tabletop roleplaying game “work” often translates to “roll well” in a GM's mind.

However, that undermines both the intent of the game and the spirit of investigative narratives. Finding the clues isn't really where the meat of the action is. It's more about the heroes figuring out where to look and working to get it by bluffing, Persuasion, or Intimidation, or all of the above via the new Networking rules. Then they have to figure out what to do with the information once they get hold of it.

Furthermore, it puts too much value on the variance of the dice. The bane of every character in an investigative scenario is trying any of the above, rolling bad, and not even knowing what they missed.

So when players act intelligently, don't be afraid to *give* them the clues. They earned them! For example, if the murder weapon is hidden under the mattress, and a player thinks to look there, let him find it. Don't make him roll Notice; he's already in the right spot.

Rolls can help you set the tone, figure out how fast things go, or what trouble lies in the path, but in the end, make sure they get the information. In the Notice roll example above, maybe a bad roll means he spots a bedsheet scrunched up awkwardly, and he has to dig into the evidence to find the murder weapon. If he rolls well, he spots it right away. Either way, the clue is found and the adventure goes on.



EXPAND THE PROCESS

Part of the binary aspect of clue-finding stems from a tendency in many roleplaying games to cull everything non-combat related into a single die roll. Need to find an obscure reference in a library? Roll Research. Need to fix a starship's hyperdrive? Roll Repair. And so on.

That comes from the wargaming roots of the hobby, where non-combat skills were originally an afterthought. On the other hand, most games break physical fights down into detailed steps lasting only a few seconds each.

Social Conflict and Dramatic Tasks provide a framework for graduated success that's perfect for breaking out of the pass-fail mindset of skill checks. Since you already know what information/clue/lead is vital for the group to move forward and what information is less vital, simply invert the scale.

Instead of a maximum amount of successes being required for the best outcome, make the necessary result

achievable at the lowest level. Everything beyond that, then, provides additional details to build on that foundation to flesh out the story.

I also like the structure of Quick Encounters for similar reasons, despite the apparent contradiction. The recommendations for dynamic situations are, however, completely on point. Evaluate the outcome of a given task based on the number of successes, with the minimum still netting the players the information that's absolutely vital to their game.

FAIL FORWARD

Finally, never let failure ruin the game. In *Deadlands Noir*, we used that idea for a couple of Setting Rules specifically to offset the chance of a player's unruly dice, or a character who got caught without any ability in a required skill.

If a character blows an essential Networking roll, maybe she still learns the important clue but suffers some other consequence. Whether it takes her more time, costs her some hard-earned cash,

or results in getting a few **Bumps and Bruises** from crossing the wrong street tough, the character suffers some penalty for failing, but still garners the information.

Conversely, a character who's more streetwise (or just rolls better) also gets the lead but doesn't suffer for it — or at least not as much. This approach rewards those characters who've invested in applicable skills while not prematurely ending the game with a dead-end investigation.

In the end, remember why your group is playing the game in the first place and what makes it fun. Reward good play and smart play, but keep things moving forward.

COMMON SENSE

—By Shane Hensley

As we went through the public release of *Savage Worlds*, we sought feedback from the public. I started with this disclaimer:

Savage Worlds is designed around common sense. By the rules, you could wear a plate helmet and a bronze helmet underneath it (see Armor Stacking). That's silly, of course, so we assume the GM controls her game and prevents that kind of issue. You could also take the Elderly and Youth Hindrances, but again, that makes no sense.

While we want the rules to be as clear as possible, it is a roleplaying game where anything can happen. For that reason we don't want to define every single possible action or edge case—when you do, you imply that if a rule doesn't exist for something, it can't happen. We've seen that in other games and don't like it. When in doubt, make your best guess, assign a modifier as you see fit, and move on.

What's great about roleplaying games is that *anything* can happen. The hard

part about *designing* roleplaying games is that...anything can happen!

We take it for granted that a character can only be of one race, for example. You're an elf or a human. But the rules don't say you *can't* be two races. We just know it doesn't make sense.

This will come up in far less obvious circumstances all the time, and it's important for the Game Master and players to understand that logic applies even in a fantasy world.

MILKING IT

Common sense also applies to players performing perfectly acceptable actions too often. It's absolutely proper to give a player a Benny when he rushes into a burning building because of his Heroic Hindrance. It might also be appropriate to award a Benny when, once inside, he takes an additional significant risk to rescue one of the people inside.

The same goes for options like Support or Test. Early on in the playtests, Veronica Blessing made a character with the Healing Edge (+2 to her Healing rolls). In "Vern's" own words "I was able to threaten a guy by telling him, in precise medical terms, what exactly would happen when I shot him in the gut with my blaster."

Since Vern used Healing for the Test, she added her Healer Edge. That's not only a "legal" use of the Edge *and* the Test rules, it's awesome! Vern was rewarded for her creativity and got to use her character's medical skill to scare off some bad guys.

The trick, of course, is limiting Vern's ability to do this repeatedly, especially in the same scene. There's nothing *in the rules* that dictates how often you can Test your foes with the same skill; the GM just has to use a little common sense. The thugs Veronica Tested aren't going to be Tested by the same line a second time, and probably won't be affected

by further Healing-based Tests unless there's new information or a dire change in the situation.

The goal of Tests and Support and their wide-open nature is to encourage and reward creativity. Doing the same thing over and over, even in different encounters, is neither of those. This is where common sense and frank communication between the Game Master and players helps tremendously.

FAILURE IS ALWAYS AN OPTION

—By Darrell Hayhurst

When I first saw that Critical Failures were a core rule for the new edition I flinched. I thought back to so many deadly catastrophes averted by a well-timed Bennie. After all, as GM's we like to see our heroes succeed and get their well-earned awesome moment rather than go out like a punk. In the interest of playtesting I used Critical Failures as written, assuming afterwards I'd invoke



a setting rule and go back to allowing re-rolls. I was wrong.

It turns out Critical Failure is load bearing and important. Friendly fire becomes more prominent and threatening, as do the interesting backlash and side-effects of many trappings. More than that, as a GM it forces you to make some space for failure and generates extra tension for every roll. Not every result is good, but overall every result is more interesting!

My favorite example of this effect happened in a *Deadlands Reloaded* session where the posse unknowingly had a werewolf aboard a small boat traveling through shark-infested waters, and the full moon was about to give them a nasty surprise — without an ounce of silver in sight. After a round or two of absolute chaos the posse figured out a plan: distract the werewolf or cooperate with the strongest character as he tried to push the creature overboard. A great plan, and this would be a crowning awesome moment for “Clay Waite,” the burly outlaw and troublemaker played by my sister and tasked with the final shove.

The setup was perfect, the werewolf distracted, the bonuses in place, and everyone was gleefully anticipating the triumph over the monster. And then Clay rolls a Critical Failure and rushes right past the werewolf to topple over the side and into the shark infested waters. This wasn’t the expected “Awesome” moment, it was a “Savage” moment instead. It became beautiful, looking around the table and seeing shocked faces and hearing genuine murmurs wondering what would happen now. That’s *Savage Worlds*.

Next round I dealt a card for the sharks, and Clay barely beat them out of the water while the werewolf did serious damage to the posse helping him up. They eventually overpowered the beast, but to this day lycanthropes hold a

special, traumatic place in the group’s memory thanks to what was planned as a minor encounter.

A Critical Failure can derail the game, but there are a few tricks a GM can use to mitigate that. If the game can’t afford for a roll to fail, don’t ask for a roll. If it’s something that needs to be a roll, be prepared for that roll to fail and push the game in a different direction — or even end it completely. The latter may seem horrible, but it changes the way the group engages with every future game. And when they do save the world or pull off a heroic victory it means more because they’ve seen it go the other way. Nothing was handed to them.

On the adventure design side, focus on what goals the heroes need to achieve, but don’t prescribe how those goals must be resolved. Think of two ways the goal might be met, so you’re prepared if one fails. Trust your players to come up with a third option you never considered, but your preparation for the first two give you plenty of material so you don’t have to improvise completely. Now a Critical Failure just pushes the group down a different path, rather than blocking them completely.

Avoid situations where a Critical Failure means certain death, or at least try to push those situations to late in a game session. If the players charge into an avoidable but deadly situation on their own, so be it. Let the dice be mean so you don’t have to be. Tragedy just makes future game sessions more powerful, because what the characters do matters.

Failure isn’t always just an option, sometimes it’s the best and most interesting option. Become savage and embrace it!



BENNIES

—By Shane Hensley

Some Game Masters are stingy with Bennies or forget to give them out entirely, but they're *critical* to the underlying "economy" of the game. They're the main tool the players have to make the "swinginess" of exploding dice work in their favor rather than against them.

Most GMs are afraid Bennies will make it too easy for the players, but over and over we've seen otherwise. Players not only get excited and try new and different things when they're awarded Bennies more frequently, but they're also far more willing to spend them on non-combat, non-critical rolls.

At Chupacabracon in Austin, Texas (another *great* convention you should try to get to!), players can *buy* Bennies at a buck a piece, with all proceeds going

to charity. Some generous players have stacks of Bennies to play with — and it doesn't ruin the game one bit.

In this kind of environment it makes it *better* as players go wild trying things they might not have done if they're hoarding their Bennies for the final battle.

Being super stingy with Bennies just isn't how the underlying game works. Taking away the possibility to counter bad luck is a sure-fire way to make the game a long slog rather than a rip-roaring and memorable good time.

Near the end of the session, the Big Bad approaches and Bennies start to dwindle. That's perfect, and happens naturally in most games because the players were rewarded for some of their antics, roleplaying, or Hindrances early on, used their rewards to power through the middle, and aren't rewarded for the same types of actions afterward. Now the bad guy is here and they'll need everything they've got to win.

Which brings us to the last point. Remember that a Benny isn't a guarantee of success. We've seen people burn through a dozen just trying to get a basic success. It's especially hard when they're Wounded, Fatigued, or otherwise beat up, but Bennies at least give the *player* some choice and control over that kind of bad luck.

Of course all of this depends on your group. If they're truly just hoarding Bennies for Soak rolls, ask yourself if there's a reason — maybe your games are really tough! (Which can be great if that's what your friends like.) But remember too — who cares? They're thinking of their Bennies as "hit points" and running low on those, whether their characters have Wounds or not, is just a different way of expressing it.

HOUSE RULES

—By Shane Hensley & Ron Rinenbach

We all play differently. Each group has its own style and, over time, gets to know what works for it. We publish the game to work for *most* situations and most people, but you know your friends best and you should feel to experiment with the rules.

Some groups give out Bennies to anyone who helps the GM shuffle the Action Deck during combat, for example. Some just have preferences, like whether cards are dealt face-up or face-down. Once you feel you really understand the game, then you can start experimenting.

The sidebar features a great example by Ron Rinenbach, who allows the use of a d30 at his convention games. It's not something we'd integrate officially, but think it's a terrific and fun idea for conventions in the hands of a GM who can think on his feet and handle some of the edge cases it causes.

RINGENBACH'S D30

Want to give players an unpredictable advantage? Especially in a convention game where fun should definitely trump balance? Try this!

Once per session — and *only* once — I let my players roll a d30 for a Trait or damage roll. Although this has gone through many permutations over the past several years, the version that I like the best is that the d30 replaces the player's highest die type (usually the Trait itself if a Wild Card, or the highest die in a damage roll).

You can still Benny the roll (unless you get a Critical Failure — ouch!), but once you use the d30 it's gone. Edges like Common Bond don't apply — each player gets one per session, no more and no less!

Most players sit on their respective d30s until the final battle. Once, in a moment of sheer statistical impossibility, I had a player roll 63 for damage (he exploded the d30 twice)! The player still mentions the roll every time we sit down together! The great thing about the d30 is that fortune is a fickle mistress who rolls both ways! As often as she rolls high, she cuts a swath of disappointment and disbelief! (I even had Shane Hensley roll a 30 in my *Justice League* game at GenghisCon one year!)

Don't have a d30? No problem! Most *Savage Worlds* Game Masters have a few d20s gathering dust and getting jealous of the other dice exploding all over the place. If you don't have a d30, offer the d20 instead!

SAVAGE STREAMING

—By Jordan Caves-Callarman

It's a great time to be a tabletop roleplayer. The hobby is exploding in popularity, with new games and new ways to play emerging all the time. Folks who might not have been otherwise exposed to the hobby are discovering it through RPG live streams on Twitch, and the communities that grow around individual shows and games are a great place to connect with new friends and new ideas.

The accessibility of tabletop RPG streaming allows any gaming group with a computer, a camera, and an internet connection to put their game out live for the world to see... But there's a difference between running a game on stream and running a game for a group at home. Stream GMs have a phantom player at their table in the form of the chat, and bringing them into the world of the game works a bit differently.

I've learned a lot from running *Wildcards* on the Saving Throw Twitch channel over the past several years, and I've found that *Savage Worlds* is particularly well-suited to running a live streamed game. I'm not here to explain what makes a "good" streaming RPG show — that's a matter of opinion. Instead, I want to share which elements I value in a stream game and how *Savage Worlds* naturally supports them.

GINEMATIC STORYTELLING

A live streamed RPG is a hybrid of a home game and theatrical entertainment, and this is something that a stream GM must keep in mind. Their responsibility becomes two-fold: run a solid game for the players, and also entertain the audience in the chat. The players are at the table, making the decisions that

shape the game and affect the story, but the audience is separated by their screens. In order to get them to commit to watch a three to four hour gaming session, a stream GM has to bring the audience into the game. One of the easiest ways to do this is to make the game as engaging as the TV shows that the audience could be watching instead.

Savage Worlds is naturally well-suited to this style of cinematic storytelling. The rules provide enough mechanics and crunch to help the audience trust that events are not being adjudicated purely at the GM's whim, but enough flexibility to take a backseat to the adventure that is unfolding at the table. This allows a stream GM to keep both the players and the audience firmly in the world of the game.

Raises add degrees of success to a character's actions, allowing for situations where they can pull off incredible stunts. Bennies provide a level of elevated effectiveness for the heroes and keep the gameplay from devolving into a slog of pass/fail die rolls. They also introduce a measure of player control to the game which creates fresh bursts of creativity at the table.

Savage Worlds provides a good balance of options to inspire the players' imaginations without locking them down to just a set number of "moves." The system offers the GMs and players the tools they need to dive headlong into adventure and removes the barriers that might get in their way and slow down the game. All of this combines to make the characters feel like heroes in a movie — able to pull off daring exploits or last-minute saves. In short, these aspects create drama, and drama is compelling.

Fast, furious, and fun are the major tenets of *Savage Worlds*, and that focus helps keep the game dynamic and exciting. That can be as fun to watch as it is to play!



BE INTERESTED, NOT INTERESTING

All this talk of entertaining an audience might make it seem like a live stream RPG group should be loud and wacky, telling jokes or doing silly voices to hold viewers' attention. However, this approach is just as likely to alienate an audience as it is to entertain them, especially if it feels artificial. On *Wildcards*, my players and I definitely maintain a level of audience awareness to help our viewers feel like they're part of the action, but we do it with a single idea firmly in our minds: be interested, not interesting.

This mantra was introduced to me by one of my favorite drama professors in college. He explained that an audience doesn't want to be talked down to or told what to focus on by a performer. Instead, if the performer is fully engaged in what they are doing, the audience will naturally get drawn in as well.

This is another area where *Savage Worlds* supports live stream play. I love

how involved my players get in each other's turns in combat. The possibility of die rolls Acing, of Jokers being drawn, and of new opportunities emerging keeps them from zoning out when it is not their turn. My table frequently erupts in cheers when a clutch damage roll explodes, or a Benny is spent at just the right time. They celebrate each other's successes and bemoan each other's failures because the system encourages them to remain engaged with one another. When the entire table is that focused on what is happening, the audience will naturally lean in with them.

FLEXIBILITY IN THE GM SEAT

Flow is important in any game, but doubly so in a stream game. The action should always move forward, and nothing kills momentum quicker than the GM pausing to hunt something down in the book. If my players decide they want to start a conflict with a character or monster I wasn't prepared for them

to encounter, I hate having to interrupt everything to look up a stat block while everyone sits and waits.

That's why I value the flexibility of *Savage Worlds*. Some GMs meticulously plan every detail ahead of time, and some GMs run fully improvised games, but all GMs know that you can never be fully prepared for the curveballs your players will throw your way. *Savage Worlds* gives GMs the freedom to stat out characters or monsters on the fly, improvise environmental effects, or customize powers in real time. That freedom helps prevent a streamed game from grinding to a halt, which in turn keeps both the players and the audience connected to what is happening.

"WATCHING THE WILDCARDS
GETS THE GROUP SUPER
EXCITED TO PLAY!"

-THE GM

SHOW US WHAT YOU'VE GOT!

I could go on and on about how great *Savage Worlds* is for streaming, but I want to encourage you to get out there and try it. The bottom line is, if you lean into the strengths of the system — cinematic combat and storytelling, natural hooks for player engagement, and improvisational flexibility — not only will you be running a great game for your players, but you'll also be running a game that others will want to watch. So why not give it a go? Stream a game or two of *Savage Worlds*, or build out your own Twitch channel and do it forever! You'll contribute to the RPG community, and you'll also help to spread awareness of my personal favorite game system. We're all waiting to see what you create!

Jordan Caves-Callarman is the GM of *Wildcards*, a *Savage Worlds* live stream which airs Friday nights on the Twitch channel *Saving Throw* (twitch.tv/savingthrowshow). He's @jordancallarman on Twitter, and he would love to discuss RPGs with you!





UNDER THE HOOD

—BY CLINT BLACK

Savage Worlds is an easy system to learn but a tricky one to master. Its simplicity can lead to the impression the game is incomplete or lacks certain elements of granularity. The key to mastery is understanding what may appear left out is already folded in. Looking “under the hood” allows adapting (or simply renaming) existing mechanics to other uses with less chance of adversely affecting game play.

While this piece can’t possibly cover every option, hopefully the situations covered illustrate the basic concepts enough for Game Masters to feel comfortable tweaking the engine themselves.

As with most every venture, communication is key. Before you put anything new into the game, advise your players that the change is conditional until proven to work in play.

There are two major factors of the system to consider — characters and rules. Let’s start with the former.

CHARACTERS

When discussing characters, we’re specifically talking about player characters. Non-player characters already fall under the simplest rule: “Just give them what they need.” The only point to clarify is “what they need” does not have to be an Edge or Ability listed in the book. If a non-player character can do something a player character can’t, it’s a Special Ability. But if players can take it, it should be an Edge built and balanced for their use (though the non-player character doesn’t have to meet any Requirements if you don’t want).

So now let’s look at player characters in the same order as character creation in the *Savage Worlds* Adventure Edition:

CONCEPT

This is first for a reason, and while it’s the shortest section, is vital to everything that comes after.

You should start by thinking about what you really *want* to play. Think long-term. Will you be *happy* playing a melee type in a scifi game where most of the characters use blasters or other ranged weapons? Will the weird Quirk you take begin to

GLINT'S COUNSEL: CON GAMES!

When running a convention game, try to build pre-gens with existing relationships with other player characters. That provides a hook to roleplay with a character who is sure to be there!

If for some reason you can't, or are using pre-made archetypes, let the players create the bonds at the beginning of the game. Ask each player to create with the player to their left a connection between their characters. When you get to the last player, everyone has at least two ties to another player character. If the players need help, use F2R2 to give them bonds to spur their creativity. Have each roll a d4 and combine the two results. If they both roll the same, the bond is particularly strong. Note, they don't have to use the bonds rolled, the d4 is just to fuel ideas.

Example: Eric and Sharon have characters with very different backgrounds and are trying to figure out their relationship. The GM asks them both to roll a d4 and each gets a 4. The GM suggests a strong Romantic relationship. The players decide "opposites attract," and their characters are married.

annoy *you* as much as your companions? Do you want your hero to start as Mean but work her way out of it as she sees the world and learns more about herself?

You might also think about how your hero fits in with the rest of the party. Are there already three other mages in the dungeon crawler group? Do your adventurers know each other already, or are you meeting for the first time?

Those interpersonal bonds can be a lot of fun, and help keep the group together. Think F2R2:

1. Friendship
2. Family
3. Rivalry
4. Romance

Those four bonds form the foundation of most relationships. To add more depth, you might even combine two or more of them. Just be careful about setting up a relationship with another player character that might derail the main story of the campaign.

RACE

A character's "race" can also represent their culture, and it's possible to have it represent both. Aquarians could be the base species but there could be two cultures, Pacificans and Atlanteans, for example. Each is represented by adding equivalent positive and negative Racial Abilities to the base Aquarian.

Example: Pacificans believe in peace and nonaggression. Typical members have the Pacifist (Major) Hindrance but also begin with a d6, Spirit. Atlanteans are militaristic but honor bound. They often have Code of Honor and start with Battle and Fighting at d4. A player who wants their character to differ from the general ethos of either society simply uses the base Aquarian profile.

HINDRANCES

Sometimes an opportunity arises where a player's Hindrance could provide a significant drawback. Feel free to offer the player a Benny and suggest this might be a good time for it to kick in. If they decline, don't force it as the player has chosen for it not to happen and should maintain agency over her hero. You can have a dialogue with the player though to find out why she thinks her character overcomes her usual flaw — perhaps even narrating the struggle much like an Interlude.

Also note that Hindrances with specific mechanical effects can still earn a player Bennies — that's entirely up to you. And yes, the reverse is also true. Occasionally, a roleplaying Hindrance can be the impetus to apply a situational modifier.

Example: After an argument in character over the best course of action, Carly's character decides to go with her idea and use *Stealth*. Jason says he wants his character to Support her, but the GM applies a -2 penalty, noting Jason's *Stubborn Hindrance* and the fervor with which he disagreed with her opinion. Jason fails the roll, so he and the GM agree his attempt at encouragement comes across as passive-aggressive criticism instead.

TRAITS (ATTRIBUTES & SKILLS)

To every rule, there is an exception, and there is one for my earlier recommendation to "feel free to tweak the game." Don't change attributes.

A derived statistic can be added as a Setting Rule, but attributes should stay the same. Attributes are a foundational aspect of the system. Changing them has cascading effects, and it's easy for a crack

in the foundation to become a major issue somewhere else. Trust me on this, or at least play it as written a while before you try.

If a player wants to use a skill in a different way, consider how other skill mechanics work for resolving the effect. For instance, if a player would like to utilize *Repair* to make some money while in town, check out the rules for *Performance* and adjust as fits the scenario. If the character is just generally handy or in a locale with a bad economy, maybe she can make up to 10% of the setting's starting funds for every full day she puts into fixing up gadgets. If she's a professor of engineering in a sci-fi setting on a profitable world, maybe she can make the setting's full starting funds in a day with a little success.

EDGES

Edges may be adapted to other uses by swapping the Traits required and matching the effect to the new Trait. Typically, it's safer to turn *Combat Edges* into other uses than vice versa.

HIDDEN HINDRANCES

For a party willing to gamble a bit, they might allow the GM to decide on a Hindrance they (and maybe their character) doesn't know about. This could be an unknown enemy or a family secret yet to reveal itself. It could even result in a secret Edge if the heroes want to leave that to the GM as well.

Example: Mark might describe how the death of his squad led to his character leaving the military and becoming a free agent. He agrees to a *Major Hindrance*, so the GM decides one member of his squad wasn't dead. The other soldier feels Mark's character abandoned him and has become an *Enemy (Major)*. The GM also determines the emotional impact of this event left Mark's character with the *Strong Willed Edge*. At some point in the game, both will likely be revealed, but for now, Mark has an aspect of the character which is waiting to be revealed even to himself.



Example: A player wants a way for his Rakashan character to be more frightening to foes in melee. The GM offers the Edge Menacing Growl which allows Intimidation to apply as a Test to all adjacent characters at -2. It's merely the Sweep Edge with Strength and Fighting replaced with Spirit and Intimidation. The character could also pick up Improved Menacing Growl to remove the penalty, just like Improved Sweep. And unlike Rabble-Rouser, the character can use this "new" Edge more than once per turn.

An easier option is to tweak an Edge and give it a new name to fit the setting. A player in *Necessary Evil: Breakout* might want an Edge like Woodsman but for surviving the urban landscape of the New York City Prison. Just adjust the Stealth bonus to apply in urban environments (there's no issue with it being overpowered combined with the Thief Edge since bonuses from Professional Edges don't stack) and change the name to "Street Rat" or something equally thematic.

GEAR

Gear is more than just armor and weapons, they're also a way for you to personalize your character. Consider a simple memento, a unique item with some emotional tie. It could be a locket with a picture of a loved one, a keyring with a Spider-Man® figurine that reminds her of her great responsibility, or a "Buzz Off" bee sticker on a laptop that shows off her snarky personality.

Most people have such mementos in real life, and for characters in a roleplaying game they might even lead to customized plot hooks and story elements

Gear is also a fantastic way to reward a player who creates a character with a rich and detailed background. Or as more commonly known to Game Masters, "future plot seeds." Single use items are the easiest and safest from a balance point of view, but any gear could be

stolen, broken, or lost if it becomes too powerful in play.

BACKGROUND DETAIL

Here's where the individual characterization really kicks in. Players can create more detail in the backgrounds and relationships with the group, but this is the perfect time to construct aspects of their character which are only revealed in play.

RULES

The Adventure Tool Kit in *Savage Worlds* has multiple options which can be adapted to other situations. For instance, the Interlude rules can be used at the opening of a convention game (or other short game) as a way of handling introductions.

The most flexible tools in the kit are Dramatic Tasks and Quick Encounters. Each is already designed for adjustments and adaptability right from the start. These "multi-tools" are invaluable when the GM needs to handle an unexpected situation in the middle of a game, but are equally useful when she has time to prep beforehand.

For instance, perhaps the players face off against an antagonist in a modern setting. They can't kill him, but they also know the authorities will be arriving soon (probably due to something they did). They must convince the rival to stop his schemes through Persuasion, Intimidation, or whatever skill they might creatively use. Normally, it might be a Social Conflict or even a Dramatic Task due to the time limit (a suggestion in the book), but the GM decides she doesn't want to break it down to rounds or dealing cards, so instead she looks at Quick Encounters.

What she wants is to let each player have a chance to roll (and roleplay) but have a guideline for their level of success. Using Quick Encounters, she

determines they need one success per player in total to convince him completely. Fewer successes reduce their effect correspondingly. She also decides if they get additional successes equal to or greater than half the number of players, they gain an additional benefit to be determined later. And with that, she's created her "Negotiation Contest" rules.

There are two other extremely flexible rules GMs should keep handy in their toolbox: Support and Tests. Each has an inherent variable nature specifically to sustain and empower player creativity through the choice of the skill used and the description of its use.

POWERS

The powers system is one which inherently requires customization via Trappings.

Power Modifiers take it a step further. On the surface, it may seem even more options aren't needed, but sometimes flexibility isn't in adding alternatives but in how existing ones are used.

Power Modifiers already allow a great deal of variation in powers, but there's another way to apply them besides scaling up or expanding effects. A player might also state they *always* use a particular set of Power Modifiers by default, and will only note when they want *less* effect.

Example: Jess is a pyromaniacal fire mage. Her bolt power always has the Lingering Damage and Damage modifier. She doesn't just singe her foes, she tries to incinerate them. Jess' foes know that if they're going to engage her in combat, they'd better not give her a chance to use her powers.

CLINT'S COUNSEL: CONSTRUCT—FREE SUMMONING!

Summon ally now allows the summoning of a specific type of ally, one based on being a Construct. Obviously, there are multiple examples of different kinds of summoning powers (zombie is of course just a specific form of the same power). The trick for the GM is how to create other creatures or beings which can be summoned and are equivalent to the ones in the book.

Here's a basic idea.

Each two Power Points for activation basically equals 16 racial build points for the base creature. Start with nothing but a d4 in all five Attributes, then add from there. Each die type to an Attribute is two points, or one point for skills. Edges are two points.

Use the Positive (and Negative) Racial Abilities tables to find any needed costs. Innate weaponry follows the same cost structure for the listed natural weapons (bite, claws, and horns), a simple one point per die type (one for Str+d4, two for Str+d6, and so on).

Modifiers: The conversion above only applies to creating a base creature. Modifiers are optional, and their flexibility comes at a great cost. Each +1 in a modifier grants just two build points. And yes, this applies even if a player says a modifier is their "base" effect as described in this book. Being able to remove it is just as effective as being able to add it.

For those who want to summon elementals (and other powerful creatures), the Super Powers option is necessary to mimic the abilities of the elementals listed in the bestiary. The GM could create and allow alternate versions, in which case, the Elemental special ability is a necessary evil, costing seven points in total.

Another use of Power Modifiers is to create “new” powers. If considering adding a new power to the system, first look to see if another power already has the same or similar effect. If so, then applying a modifier to the existing power may be the simpler and easier solution, while granting the player access to the other uses of the power.

For example, perhaps the GM wanted to add a *suggestion* power, which allows the caster to give a target a single command which they carry out immediately. Taking control of a character sounds like *puppet*, but this is a much less powerful version. The GM could use *puppet* as the base, using the same basic rules included there, but reducing the cost to a single Power Point since it’s much less effective.

TAKE IT OUT FOR A SPIN

Once you’ve added a change, new rule, or variant subsystem, try it out in play before committing to it. Remember this:

Every change should be considered provisional until proven in playtesting.

Rules can be altered, removed, added, tweaked, or even purposefully broken, but none of that matters until it’s used in play. No amount of math or planning will insure a rule works when the human factor is added.

How do you know if a rule “works?”

It adds more fun to the game.

There’s no way to stress that enough... but I’ll try: A rule works when it increases the amount of fun in the game.

Broken rules that everyone wants to use (like an Edge every player takes) are pretty easy to recognize, but remember, the goal is overall fun. A rule which is fun for one player but detracts from the game for all the others isn’t increasing the total amount of fun for everyone. And an Edge or Hindrance may be mechanically balanced, but if no one wants to take it,

then it isn’t “balanced” against the appeal to the players.

When those situations occur, don’t panic because you’re just in the first part of playtesting. The second part is feedback. Ask the players why the rule doesn’t appeal to them. Some may not feel comfortable presenting their opinions, especially when groups have at least one player with a more forceful personality than the others. This is a case where the “anonymity” of the internet works in your favor. Have the players send their feedback by email or some other private communication and assure them it will remain in confidence.

After feedback, there’s only the last instruction on every bottle of shampoo to follow: Repeat.

Edit the rule until it does work or start from scratch to make a new rule for the same desired result. An Edge every player wants might be overpowered, but it could also be a new Setting Rule everyone enjoys. Because sometimes when you’re under the hood, you have to think outside the box.



Clint with his homemade Sharknado™.

ANY TIME, ANY PLACE

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