How to Make a Great Campaign

Avalon Games

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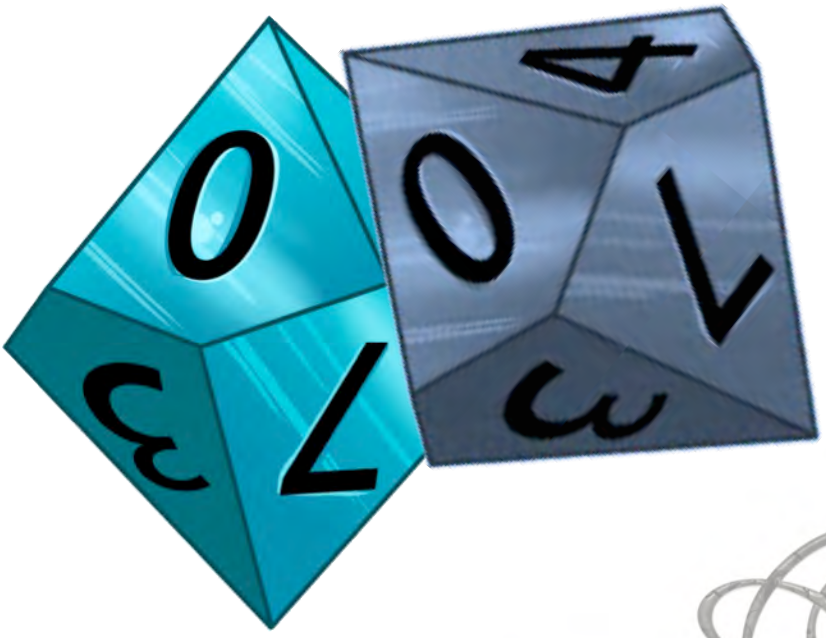

If you have played role-playing games for any amount of time it is likely you have heard one of your friends proudly exclaim “wow, what a great campaign that was!” Session after session of tense and exciting role-playing and combat that created such fascinating stories you re-tell them for years to come. Often times it is easy to think that these people are just lucky enough to played under a great game-master, which is probably somewhat true. However there is more to it than that.

Great campaigns may be the stuff of legends but they certainly aren't limited to great GMs. In fact, anyone can create a long-running, epic campaign. The only problem is most people don't know how to do it. Luckily you had the foresight to pick up this book. With my help you too can learn how to craft a game that your players will talk about for years to come.

This book contains a lot of advice and recommendations and with each comes one big caveat; use only what you need. Not all campaigns, groups, game-masters and games are created equal and as such not all of this advice will apply to you. More importantly you should always adhere to this one rule; you and your player's happiness comes first. If you find some of the advice in this book absurd, uninspiring or useless then feel free to disregard it.

Lastly I need to confess that this book focuses on several ideas of creating an interesting campaign, but mostly in a macro sense. You won't find tips for exciting battles, interesting locations or even how to make intricate plots. Instead this work focuses on the ideas behind crafting a thorough, complete and well-developed campaign that contains a beginning, an end and a major villain. Much of what is written here will be put to use when designing your campaign but may not be useful on a session by session basis.

My hope is that somewhere in this book there is enough good advice that you can pick and choose the appropriate portions that apply to you. Remember role-playing games are all about having fun as a group. So play the type of games that you enjoy and take what you need to make your games better. Game on!

What is a Campaign?

Before I can properly share the process of creating a great campaign it is important that we define what I think a campaign is. To me a campaign is a series of interlocking or interconnected adventures extended over a period of time. During this process the characters move from one scenario to another, defeating enemies and overcoming challenges. Generally the term campaign refers to multiple sessions with the same characters.

A great campaign is all of this and more. Great campaigns have ruthless villains, heroic victories and plot lines that span from session to session. In my opinion there are many different types of campaigns but not all of them can be categorized as great.
In order to craft a great campaign we must first analyze the factors that make your game worth coming back to session after session. All great campaigns share similar qualities. These are great villains, a story the players participate in and non-player characters that the players grow to care for.

Not all campaigns will contain all of these elements but they may still be great. One of the most appealing aspects of role-playing games is that not all of them are the same. More importantly you need to decide what it important to your players. Prior to beginning a campaign it is always a good idea to discuss what type of game your players want, or expect. This allows you to prepare ahead of time without wasting significant time designing scenarios that don't appeal to your players.

Start at the End

What I am about to tell you is a secret I stumbled upon purely by accident. In fact it is probably the best piece of advice I have ever learned that I can give you. Sadly, you may have heard this before. It is not profound and I am certain I am not the first to mention it. However it is an extremely useful piece of advice. at least it has been for me.

I used to create campaigns that contained interesting enemies, exciting locations to explore and wonderful plot lines. However each had the same thing in common, they eventually fizzled out and died. Nothing ruins the fun like stopping a campaign mid-point and leaving the players unsatisfied.

So what went wrong?

For me the answer was simple. I had no idea where I was going.

For all of the challenging adversaries and intricate plots I had created I didn't know where I wanted the campaign to end. Turns out that for me, knowing how my campaign was going to end was an important aspect in planning my sessions. As a result I ran and ran and ran games until I tired of it, unfortunately the players didn't tire of the games quite as quickly. When they fell apart my players were often unhappy and unfulfilled.

In the end I learned my games weren't bad, they were just poorly designed. When I started to evaluate the process I stumbled upon an interesting idea. I really had no idea where I was going with some of my campaigns. As an experiment I decided I would try something different next time. I choose to start at the end.

When I began to work on my next campaign I didn't run out and design a dungeon for my players to run through or develop some intricate plot. Instead I thought about how I wanted my campaign to end. This may sound backwards but if you give it even a little bit of thought you may be surprised how difficult this is. So how did I do it?

I had a rough idea in my mind of what levels I was comfortable running up too until I felt the PC's just grew too powerful. I used that as a guide to determine how high I would allow the characters to climb. In essence, I put a level cap on my campaign.

You may be wondering why this is so important?

For me, the answer was simple. I knew what to plan for in the future. Furthermore I had a good idea of how much my group could accomplish each session (having played together for years) and how much experience I would be handing out, roughly speaking. This allowed me to plan out roughly the number of sessions I would need to run to get to my desired level.

In the end I determined I would be running a campaign for roughly one year's time, every other week. This was a huge advantage as I had a start date and an end date (roughly) in my head. Even if I didn't share this information with my players I had something to plan for. This little bit of knowledge made all the difference.

Not all games are equal and some of you may be thinking that you run a game that doesn't use levels. This advice still applies. I just happened to choose a level as my end point but you can pick a climatic fight, the end of a storyline, or any other ending you desire. This process works exactly the same.

Should you desire your players to fight the main villain in his home in London on Christmas Eve then you have established an ending. It can be specific, or arbitrary, but deciding ahead of time where/when/how you want the campaign to end is a significant piece of advice that could potentially help you.

You can decide the world will end if several portals are not closed in time, to end your campaign when group reaches 12th level, or to stop when the vile dragon is killed.

Whatever you decide doesn't matter as much as making the choice to stop your campaign at some time in the future, preferably in a climatic moment!

By doing this you allow yourself an end goal. This allows you to focus on how you want to get there. A great campaign is about the journey, not the end result. That being said you want to know where you are driving before you get into the car. Now the only question is, how do we get there?

On to the Past!

With an idea for where you want your campaign to end the next logical step isn't to go ahead and start the campaign, but instead to delve into the past. This step shouldn't be a comprehensive analysis of the entire history of the world, though it could be if you desire to do so. Instead it should be a review of what happened in the region(s) you are going to use in your campaign.

This is an important step and one that should not be overlooked. Whether you are using a pre-packaged campaign world or making one up on your own it is vital you understand the past for a variety of reasons.

If your group is going to be adventuring in a region that longs for new leadership there may be an influx of bandits and political intrigue everywhere the players go. Perhaps your are running a modern campaign in the present day United States, the attitudes of the people will be much different than those encountered in Africa, all because of what has happened in the past.

Review all the necessary histories of all the areas you are going to playing in and jot down any interesting tidbits about the history you find. Not only will this give you a good idea of what has happened before the coming of the PC's but it will give you inspiring events to build off when you go about designing your campaign.

By the time you are done you should have a good idea of what the people are like, what type of government rules the region, how these people earn a living, and many other interesting facts for which to build a campaign off of.