

POST-MORTEM ANALYSIS

WHAT WENT RIGHT

1) THE HOOK

My “one of the PCs’ heads is stolen by a wizard” hook worked exceptionally well. It was a novel introduction to the game and set up player sympathy for the people of a town in which having one’s head stolen by a wizard is a regrettably common occurrence. People liked the quiriness of this setting, and found it fun to consider what being in such a place would be like.

The danger of losing body parts prompted players to really consider their characters’ situation. At several points during the early parts of the game Daren remarked in a thoughtful, surprised sort of way just how much not having a head sucked, and all the players were very cautious when infiltrating Grimsby’s tower. The goal of retrieving Sir Pendleton’s head was never in question, and motivation to continue forward remained high throughout the entirety of the game.

2) DEEP KNOWLEDGE OF THE BACKSTORY AND GAME WORLD

In planning my game, I gave a lot of thought to the backstory. I wanted to make sure that the game world was consistent and that the various puzzles and obstacles the PCs could encounter had justifications for their existence. I think I was largely successful in this, and although a lot of this backstory was not ever communicated to the players, it gave me the ability to improvise within the world as necessary while still having the support of a well-defined framework.

For example, one of the first things the players did upon entering the wizard Grimsby’s tower was thoroughly search the scribery. I hadn’t planned for there to be anything of particular note inside the scribery, but I wanted to reward the players’ effort with something beyond obviously non-descript and non-essential spell books and scrolls. Knowing the backstory between Grimsby and Grace, I was able to make up a box of old love letters on the spot, which fit with the characters’ history, gave the players more information, and left unanswered questions that could motivate further exploration.

3) INTERACTIONS BETWEEN PLAYER CHARACTERS

One thing that surprised me was that as good as it was when the player characters were engaged with the game world, things were best of all when the PCs were engaged with each other.

In planning my game I had given some consideration to the dynamics between players—I composed the adventuring party to be a small, tight-knit group with mutual trust, and I aimed to create three distinct skill sets and a good balance of ability. I set up my most experienced player as the clear leader of the party, and tried to (a) offset the greater power of being the leader by having him suffer the indignity/role-playing challenge of losing his head. (b) offset the greater responsibility of being the leader by giving him the additional motivation/Storyteller attention of losing his head.

In the course of running my game, however, I saw that—even more than battles and discoveries—it was moments between player characters that seemed to get the most response. Whether the interaction was cooperative, competitive or directly adversarial, this was what got the players revved up, and what they talked about most after the game.

My game had some good interactions between the player characters, and a good *range* of interactions between the player characters. Sir Pendleton and Yorick cooperated to collect and quiet all the heads on the first floor, there was a competitive feel to the PCs' attempts to obtain all of Grimsby's organs in the garden, and the game climaxed with a struggle between Sir Pendleton and the rest of the group. Knowing what I know now, if I were to run another game I would devote more effort towards actively facilitating these kinds of moments. The puzzles in particular seem like a good opportunity for player characters to work together, and a puzzle that required cooperation or encouraged competition between PCs would not be difficult to devise.

4) FREEDOM WITH DIRECTION

One of my goals was to allow the players freedom in their actions and choices without overwhelming them or letting them feel directionless. To this end, I structured the environment of the game to support exploration and a gradual sharpening of focus. At the beginning of the game, I plopped the PCs down on a road, on foot, approaching a town. This provided a focus and kept the PCs moving during the little time I gave them to interact with one another while they all still had heads. I then followed up with my hook to provide a new and strong motivation to pull the PCs through the rest of the adventure.

Upon reaching the town, the players had a lot of freedom to explore—so much so that it could have been overwhelming. I countered this by providing them with a complete map of the town straight away, labeled with districts and landmarks, so they could pick something and go there. Although the players did seem a little lost while wandering the farmers' market, they were able to find a lot of information in a single place by visiting the tavern. Their decision to go directly to the tower afterwards effectively ended the loose, fact-finding portion of the adventure. Because the players had multiple clear indications of where they needed to go in order to move on to the next phase of the adventure, they had no trouble choosing to move on to a more structured environment.

The tower was smaller and provided more of a clear direction than the town—namely, up. There were only two or three ways to enter the tower, and once inside, the walls provided boundaries and limited the movement decisions a person could make. In addition, the players were able to estimate the number of floors once they were inside, based on the overall height of the tower, which allowed them to anticipate the remaining duration of the adventure. The first floor had four rooms, which admitted exploration, and the garden of the second floor acted as a large single room, allowing for some exploration but also increasing the feeling of focus. Grimsby's study, on the third floor at the top of the tower, was a clear goal and the logical final destination.

5) CONCLUDING THE ADVENTURE AT THE THREE-HOUR MARK

I made a serious attempt to design my game so that it could be concluded in a three hour period. I decided in advance that if the game ran over three hours I would do whatever was necessary as a Storyteller to wrap the story up no more than five to ten minutes past the three-hour mark. In fact, the time constraints of scheduling my game session were such that this proved to be a necessity rather than a

choice—I had to run the game in a timely fashion in order to attend an important meeting immediately afterwards.

Working within these constraints helped to keep a strong focus over the course of the game. I was very pleased to find that although my game started late, if we had begun on time it almost certainly would have been able to be run within three hours. As it was, our late start meant the game had to be hastily concluded after the players defeated Grimsby (my original plan had been to have them fight a final artificial person who had been specially designed for combat and was powered by Sir Pendleton’s head). However, since Grimsby himself had been defeated it was not difficult to resolve the plot—I just altered things so that the spell on that last artificial person dissipated with Grimsby’s death. It was a great feeling to leave the players wanting more and asking if they could come discreetly roll dice at my meeting in order to play out that final battle.

WHAT WENT WRONG

1) PORTRAYING NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS (ROLE-PLAYING AND CONSISTANCY)

Despite the attention I gave to the game world and overall story, I did not adequately prepare to role-play my non-player characters. For example, I had specifically intended replacement wooden heads as a way to encourage the use of special voices, but it was not until I was actually running my game that I considered how to speak as someone who had a wooden replacement head. I also found it difficult, even knowing NPC’s backstories as I did, to play them as distinct characters acting in ways consistent with their personalities and motivations.

My attempt to “wing it” in role-playing my NPCs gave me some idea of what kind of preparation would have been useful. For one thing, I should have planned out ways to exaggerate my NPCs more. My impulse is to shy away from exaggeration, but it’s effective in getting a character across and makes it easier to keep characters consistent. If I had devoted more time and thought to it I might also have been able to skew my NPCs towards my role-playing strengths and drawn up a cheat sheet of strategies for playing those character types that don’t come to me naturally. As it was, my players were forgiving, but the game would have benefitted from better-played NPCs, and this might have encouraged the players to role-play more as well.

2) GAUGING THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF INFORMATION TO GIVE

During the first puzzle—figuring out how to get inside the tower without setting off the alert spell—I didn’t give my players a chance to figure the puzzle out for themselves. I was worried that I might not have given them enough information to figure it out, and so I kept having them make rolls so that their characters could make realizations that would help the puzzle become easier to solve.

I could have avoided this uncertainty by play-testing my puzzle before I ran the adventure and making a concrete decision on how much information to give initially. I could also plan ahead hints to have at my disposal in case the players seemed to be struggling. As it was, I think my players were intrigued by the puzzle even though I didn’t really allow them the opportunity to figure it out for themselves. Luckily, I had made much more solid decisions regarding the puzzle of the riddles in the garden, so I was comfortable

sitting back and letting the players grapple with that one, knowing I had ways of giving hints later if necessary.

3) THE MECHANICS OF COMBAT

It seemed that in every combat I ran I bungled the numbers on multiple occasions, losing track of this or that or factoring something in the wrong way. It was a relief that somehow all these mistakes didn't cause the game to stall or even hiccup. I think my margin of error, though larger than it should have been, was well encompassed by the group's enthusiasm and our willingness to muddle through. But although my players were very forgiving, combat is an important part of RPGs and I'd have a lot more confidence if I could consistently get it right.

This is something that only practice can help, I think. I might have had an easier time with the simpler Roleplaying 101 rules, but I'd rather get more experience with White Wolf mechanics.

4) KEEPING EVERYONE ENGAGED WHEN THE PARTY SPLITS UP

At one point while the party was exploring the first floor of Grimsby's tower, Sir Pendleton told Robert and Yorick to go sit by the stairs. Sir Pendleton then went off and got himself involved in combat in another room. Although Yorick eventually went to join in the action, Robert remained sitting on the stairs by himself for a long time before going up to the second floor of the tower alone.

Sir Pendleton and Yorick spent a fair amount of time battling artificial people and systematically collecting heads on the first floor, leaving Robert to his own devices. I couldn't tell whether Wiksy was bored during this time or not. I made sure to spend some time giving him descriptions in response to Robert exploring the garden on the second floor, and he may have enjoyed being the first person up there and finding the three riddles, but once he had those there wasn't much for him to do up there until Pendleton and Yorick finally finished and the group reformed. Wiksy marks "head collection downstairs" as a high point on his interest curve graph, so maybe he enjoyed simply listening to that part of the adventure, but at the time I worried he might be feeling left out and losing interest.

5) DECIDING ON AN ENDING

Because the adventure could end very differently depending on the players' choices, there was a strange period near the end of the game in which Sir Pendleton was working to kill Grimsby by chopping the sapling (actually Grimsby's enchanted lungs) in half while Yorick and Robert struggled to prevent him from doing so. Yorick felt convinced that the PCs could recover Sir Pendleton's head by healing Grimsby, and made a deal with Grimsby to return the fish, sapling, and dove in exchange for all of the heads that Grimsby had stolen. However, Yorick did not communicate or discuss any of this with Sir Pendleton. Sir Pendleton, naturally enough, was inclined to seek revenge and kill Grimsby in order to get his head back, and was confused when Yorick began healing the sapling he was endeavoring to destroy.

This conflict between the players actually made for a dramatic climax. Sir Pendleton wore down the sapling's magical protection over the course of a long, drawn-out battle of his chopping versus Yorick's healing, but Robert dove in and grabbed the sapling before Pendleton could deal the final blow. In the instant that Robert was handing the sapling to Grimsby after a mad dash up the stairs of the tower, Sir

Pendleton caught up and struck it in two, killing Grimsby instantly to great cinematic effect. Everyone seemed entirely pleased with the ending, even Yorick and Robert, who had worked hard to prevent that turn of events. So somehow the ending of the adventure worked well. It was the period of confusion the preceded it that was problematic.

In my effort to allow freedom and choice, I think I gave my players mixed signals. The possibility of healing Grimsby should have been left to explorer-type players—those who want to discover backstory information and use that knowledge to solve problems in unexpected ways. In making additional information readily available to players who weren't really looking for it, I complicated their decisions and made them uncertain of what they should do. In other words, although the game benefitted from a strong and detailed backstory, and although I'm the type of player who wants to understand the story and game world as deeply as possible, as a Storyteller I should be content to keep my secrets. I think the ending and overall game would have been stronger and more focused had I let the players know only as much as they needed to know, and then any additional information that they themselves actively sought out.