

## MANU

OK, I'm going to address this by showing what I did in a specific instance, namely the brief session of *Finding Haven* I played with you and Helma.

Backstory: this was the setting, the libertarian aliens are in control of Earthcorp., people have to go to the Culling when they turn 40, the winners wind up getting implanted with eggs or dined on, and so on.

Situation: the PCs learn the Truth while on a ship. They decide to mutiny and take over the ship, before they're found out and sent to Thought Therapy or "have an unfortunate accident".

Ok so setting up the first scene, where the PCs discovered the truth, was simple: it was the start of the session, and gave the players all the basic info about the situation. From that point, play flowed from a combination of player choices and what I had prepped about the NPCs, the functioning of the ship, and general knowledge of the setting.

I had prepped some notes on a few notable npcs: the guy who invited the PCs into the winner's suite (let's just call him "Guy" because I don't want to go look him up), the Captain, the XO, and the ship's physician. In addition, I had notes on how the Biots operated, and general emergency procedures, including how far away Enforcement Vessels were.

Let's take it from the point where Guy left to recruit other crew members to the cause, while you and Helma made for the pharmaceutical lab to concoct some biot-disrupting liquids. So it was my responsibility to frame the next scene. To do that, I had to make use of my "background knowledge of unobservable phenomena", as we used to say in one of my grad schools. Unobservable by the players, anyway. So what I knew was this:

- Guy was going to try to meet in secret with other crew, one at a time, to play them video from the winner's suite and try to convince them to mutiny; - The crew know they are often being observed, but Guy thinks he knows where all the cameras are. He's wrong, of course.
- There's nothing much for the Captain to do in the middle of a flight like this. Mainly what he does is spy on people through various surveillance devices. He knows that the XO wants to find some dirt on him so she can rat him out and take his place, so most of his time is spent keeping an eye on her. He does spy on most everyone though, eventually.
- The XO in turn is spying on the Captain, and occasionally lays small loyalty traps for him, hoping he'll say the wrong thing so she can report him to headquarters. She also needs to be concerned about the rest of the crew - an ambitious employee can do the same to her.
- The physician just had his 39th birthday, and is freaking out about the upcoming Culling. He's currently taking illicit drugs to deal with his fear.
- The crew is on a bell curve as far as their capacity for empathy, and their desire to rebel, is concerned: some are ready to revolt at the slightest encouragement, others are hard-core loyalists.
- The Biots are on a low level of readiness. They occasionally conduct surveillance, but aren't looking for anything specific. They investigate unusual changes in patterns of behavior, and their first level of intervention is to suggest Thought Therapy. If on further investigation they

find signs of concern to them (mainly actions or disloyalty against the aliens themselves) they escalate in aggression.

I figure Guy is starting to meet with other crew members. Well, he probably won't be spotted by either the Captain or the Biots for a while. If the PCs take about an hour to reach the lab, maybe he'll have met with 3 or 4 people. How successful will he be? I'm not sure how to determine that. So I ask myself what I know about him. He's not stupid, and has known the crew for awhile, so I figure he can start with more likely candidates, and so should be more than 50% effective - maybe 75%. So if he meets with 4 people he'll convince 3 of them.

Now I have another problem. What do I do with the one he failed with? How would he react? I don't have detailed notes on the rest of the crew, they're just generic. I ask myself what the possibilities are, and figure: (1) he figures his loyalty is being tested by the corporation, and trips an alarm immediately; (2) he's a genuine believer and becomes enraged, attacking immediately; (3) he's calm and declines, then reports Guy later, or wants to use the incident as blackmail material; (4) he's loyal but smart, and pretends to go along, seeking to betray the mutineers at the worst possible moment. Which possibility is the most likely? I have no idea, except that Guy is probably smart enough not to try to recruit someone so loyal they'd become instantly enraged. So I decide it'll be either 3 or 4. I roll a die in my dice app to decide, and 4 is the result, which is the one I liked best anyway. So Guy and his recruits, including a mole, head to the rendezvous point.

I decide it's unlikely that the Captain or XO have noticed anything amiss yet. But as time goes by, it will become more and more likely that one or both of them will spot something suspicious. How to determine when? If nothing obvious happens (like an alarm going off, explosion, etc.), I decide I'll roll dice, adding one more every scene, and if a 1 comes up they are alerted.

The Biots check for irregularities in patterns of behavior, and so must have surely noticed that the PCs were behaving in unusual fashion. One Biot is dispatched to investigate.

So now that I've assessed all these "behind the scenes" factors, it makes sense that the next scene should include a mild Biot interrogation. That scene went well for you and Helma, so the Biots do not raise their level of alertness. Since nothing else going on in the background would interfere, the next scene should be your PC's attempt to create their anti-Biot chemical cocktail. If your rolls go poorly, then that affects how others respond; if the rolls continue to go well, then I'd check into what's happening in the background again, and most likely Guy would want to meet with you to discuss next steps, so I'd frame that scene.

So looking this over, it seems to me that I framed scenes based on what I knew about the NPCs, their motives and capabilities, and what they knew at the time. When I didn't know something, I asked myself what I did know about the NPC or situation and tried to extrapolate from that, or asked what the possibilities were and rolled dice. I'm always looking for other tips and techniques for this kind of thing.

RON

This is excellent for discussion. If it's OK with you, I'd like to re-phrase it using my breakdown of backdrop, situation, and scenes. I think it will show how hard I'm breaking from "setting" as that term is typically used.

MANU

Yeah sure please do.

RON

To summarize in my terms:

- Backdrop: variety of SF motifs and context, including atmosphere and tone, the Earthcorp culture; the libertarian aliens, Culling, winners get egg-implanted or eaten; more specifically, Biot policy and procedures, as well as concepts or practices for social power and hierarchies.
- Situation: this ship, this Culling, how the ship works, discovery of the information (which is fixed as prep), these player-characters, and these NPCs with their personalities, histories, tensions, and habits. Speaking fictionally from (say) a character's point of view, this situation represents zooming in on some exact place in the backdrop; however, speaking procedurally from a real-person point of view, anything in the backdrop is validated or established only because we're seeing it manifested as situation.
- Scene: exactly, immediately, sense-impression-wise, where they are, what they're doing, what they see. Again, that's the fiction. When we turn to real people, so that "in a scene" is synonymous with "now we're playing, what do you do," then it must include uncertainties, constraints, and procedures which are initiated by different people. Via the procedures, "what happens" happens.

So, from the moment of play you mentioned. In the terms I'm trying to demonstrate in this post, having played a scene or two, characters have arrived at goals, swung into action, and effectively necessitated one or more new scenes simply because they're moving around. Looking at all the activity and its effects, the question is now, what IS this new scene?

Exactly as you say: before doing anything else, you had to consult the situation – meaning, one unit of scale above and beyond any character's muscle movements and current location. Your list is spot-on: what do each of the NPCs know (and not know, e.g., Guy and the Captain), how ready or alerted are the Biots, and several other things of that kind. Therefore when we, the real people, focus our attention in scene terms again (where, who, what's happening, what do you do), one or more things about the situation affects / impacts / determines important things about this scene.

You had some useful logistic tools based on the fiction, ,e.g., how long it would take Guy to do what he's doing, how long it would take for our characters to get to the lab, and how the Biots would be behaving. You also had some instrumentation to help you, some of which you had to invent (which is fine), all of which made the process much better because you didn't have to live in the future and guess what would be "good" later. I'm talking about the rolls for the skeptical crew member Guy talks to and for the Captain or XO to spot the unusual activity.

Given all your conclusions, only one thing necessarily had to "come get us," the lone Biot, because everything else was either a bit delayed (the skeptical crew member, now a mole) or, luckily for us, belayed (the surveillance). Hence: meet the Biot! That's our scene.

In my diagram, that's starting with the big black arrow from Situation into Scenes, then (upon the conclusion of the first scene or so), going back along the dotted arrow in the reverse direction,

hanging out in Situation for a couple of minutes while you checked its various features and rolled some dice, and starting the new scene via the same big black arrow again.

So far, I don't think I said anything different from what you said aside from changing one term you used ("backstory") to the one I really mean ("backdrop"), and distinguishing very carefully between across-ship multi-person activities and events vs. played moments based on characters' senses and fictional details.

Now to clarify the diagram a bit further, I hope. Let's say some activity we do in a scene means the dotted arrow has a lot of teeth: sabotaging the ship's surveillance system, or really screwing up the Biots. Or maybe when you check up at the Situation level again, all sorts of things trip triggers, like the Captain checking in or the XO doing something heinous or anything else that is either necessarily indicated or subject to dice (and hit the values that lead to action). Or both! This is a critical aspect of play which I am tagging as woefully underdeveloped, no matter whether it's supposed to be a Story Master Superego GM or a So Hip Indie GM-Less Shared Narrative. Without knowing WHAT to do at this point, both degenerate into non-role-playing story workshopping and into strange power problems.

Nothing really changes procedurally. You still go to the big black arrow and make the new scene or affect the scene in progress, but this time dumping in all this situational-level consequence. We may have thought we were in the scene doing X or Y or Z just like we planned, but now alarms are going off or Biots are shorting out or we find the murdered Captain's body with the XO standing there staring at us (I'm being silly, but I'm sure you see what I mean) or whatever. I say again: last time, there were no particularly extreme consequences descending upon us from the situational context, but this time there are ... and the GM didn't have to control or dictate that this difference occurs. They didn't **control** play, they **played**.

Does this make sense? There remains more discussion about the Situation's arrows which relate to Backdrop, but we didn't see that in play so we can talk about it some other time.

MANU

Yes! Your breakdown here really helped me get a better handle on these concepts. And almost no game talks in detail about how use Situation to set up a scene, in anything but the most general terms. As you say, it's an underdeveloped area. Also, I'm guessing the same dynamic will play out on a larger scale between Situations. Like say this Situation comes to a conclusion and the PCs have either successfully taken the ship, or perhaps have failed and are in a Thought Therapy Rehab center, or spinning out into space in an escape pod. What's the next Situation? It will follow from the previous one, combined with knowledge of the backdrop (in the same way I checked in with the NPCs and so on for the next scene, I check in with the backdrop's features to help come up with the next Situation). Is that correct?

RON

I understand how you're arriving at that idea, but my diagram is intended to show differently. I hope this isn't confusing, but I'm going to articulate what you said first in order to demonstrate that I understand it, using orange-colored text to match the fictional diagram, and then I'm going to say what I think is really happening, corresponding to the black procedural diagram.

If the outermost arrows (Backdrop:Situation) were reversed in their direction, so that they pointed inwards just like the Situation:Scenes arrows, then it would mean the Backdrop circle was not dotted. It would be the thickest of them all, the most “solid.” The idea here would be to consult Situation when dealing with consequences within and between Scenes, and to consult Backdrop when dealing with consequences within and between Situations.

To repeat: the orange text above is what I think **doesn't** happen during play. It makes perfect sense for a character inside the fiction (the orange arrows in the diagram) but not as procedure carried out by real people.

I'll start with the procedural (black) diagram's graphics. The Backdrop circle is dotted, just like the Scenes circle. The dotted pattern indicates that this concept is provisional, “made real” because it's referencing Situation. One big black arrow, corresponding to your example, points outwards toward Backdrop from Situation, just as the other big black arrow points inwards toward Scenes from Situation. Think of both big black arrows as “making” things. Situation is depicted as always the source point of the big black arrows, so given my arrangement of the diagram, they go in opposite directions.

A very general way to put this in creative-and-play terms is that any Backdrop which isn't validated by mattering (greatly!) to a situation of play is fictionally provisional, even totally iffy, whether admitted or not. It is perhaps viewed most positively as a promise, sometimes a bit of a lie or tease (“This is a vast setting! Vast, I tell you!”).

Now I'll get concrete about the black arrow pointing toward the backdrop, which would be easier if we had a real example. ... OK, let's say that the characters go through a great deal of crisis and confrontation, and unlikely or at least amazing as it seems, speaking as a player of this game, we do in fact hijack this ship. This whole Situation we were in is, effectively, resolved – we are no longer immediately about to be Culled, Thought-Therapized, shot by any of a number of candidates, spaced, or torn to pieces and possibly eaten. It's axiomatic that at this point, play needs a new Situation in the largest sense (“scenario,” et cetera).

Let's say we buzz off to meet with those Golden Wedge pirates. OK – you're the GM, and for this game, you have Situational Authority for “what happens” at transition points of this kind. What do you do?

You have to tell us a location, most generally, “on the way” or “you've arrived,” with tons of solid features in either case. You have to consider NPCs who are there and all their fuckin' problems. You have to consider other features even farther off like the government and corporate management of the ship we stole. You have to consult and if (more like when) necessary create any number of conditions for the people on the ship and its current capabilities or damaged/broken issues. It's exactly the same task you had before so we could start to play the first Situation.

Yes, I know it **feels** like you checked into the Backdrop to see “what's there” (for the location and for the “ripples” of what we've done) and that we have **traveled** to that point in the Backdrop and in your notes. But that's not true. Instead, you've set up necessary components of a new Situation, meaning, sufficient for play, so as we begin actually to play, those Backdrop provisions and promises

are sucked **toward** us (all of us, you included), and into the activity of “our hands.” Now they aren’t provisional or just-a-promise any more at all. They’re solid.

Does that make sense?

MANU

Wow! A cool twist. I think I get it... so the way you see it, Situation is “primal”, in the sense that everything else is contingent upon it. Once something appears in Situation and becomes part of play it’s “real”, and until then it’s just potential. So I may have as part of backdrop that the aliens have enforcement vessels that patrol the system, but if they’re not part of the Situation we’re in then they’re potential play fodder only. So suppose the Situation involves the players traveling to rendezvous with a pirate vessel, and I think, “wait a minute, the aliens will want to investigate why they’re off-course, and send a ship to intercept.” It’s not that I consulted the backdrop to come up with this - I consulted the Situation, and then used an element from the backdrop to help flesh it out. Is this on the right track?

RON

Perfect, in reference to the arrow pointing from situation to backdrop. Now I need to address the strong contrast between that arrow and the other one, which is pointing from situation to scenes.

To continue: to keep playing in a scene or to shift from scene to scene, it’s very intuitive to reference the enclosing situation for content. To keep playing in a situation (scene by scene by scene) or to shift from big situation to big situation, is less intuitive because as we’ve just discussed, backdrop fictionally encloses the situations. So it’s difficult to admit that this is not merely expanding the scene-to-situation relationship up in scale. To address this fully, we really have to look at specific techniques.

The lack of working **rules** for doing this (constraints, uncertainties, procedures with known users) throughout RPG history, for either level, is so glaring that I think it has specific and toxic causes. That isn’t our main topic here, but I’m pointing at it because you’ve spent so long trapped in the trap of “what is good for the story, what will be interesting, what will they like, will it be good enough,” that I think we should acknowledge that nothing we’re talking about here is caught in that trap.

Regarding the next scene, for example, even if the GM makes new stuff up, the making-up may be carried out in known and working ways that arrive at the next scene in a playable fashion, as I’ve summarized above for what the start of a scene needs, not in some tap-dancing way that is trying to control the whole experience of the session, or more.

So: here we are, having concluded a situation, and continuing to play. It’s time to consider what the backdrop is, in terms of procedures. What do I actually have in hand and how am I supposed to relate to it? This is a matter of personal choice no matter what the game author thinks, but for the moment, let’s say I am committing myself to the textual rules and implications just to keep the discussion simple.

It may be that the game text(s) are rather explicit and detailed about the backdrop to this situation. It took place in a town, but the text also tells me where the town is on the continent, and how it

relates geographically to centers of power and to many other relevant social and natural features. It took place during a weekend of fictional time, but the text also tells me how this particular weekend relates to the seasonal festivals and to the unusual/non-Earthly turn of the seasons. Going by what I said above, the apparent solidity of this material in text looks and feels so “real,” but it isn’t – again, it’s only real-ified if and when I suck it into the next situation in situational terms (places, people, conditions, backstory, et cetera).

Therefore we can talk about my willingness to **use** it this way as a formal technique: the procedures of play, according to me for this time and for this game, include “look it up and incorporate,” not because it says I have to, but because I want to. I also suggest that exactly **how** I do it is always much more personalized than people who are into setting and care about canon are willing to admit. One person’s Humakti aren’t another person’s Humakti when it comes to providing the necessary material for the next situation, no matter how detailed the book may be about them.

*Trollbabe* and *Sorcerer & Sword* do it rather differently, or rather, the texts present a different technique. For both of them, the backdrop is deliberately aesthetic rather than full of explicit content. They differ from one another in that *Trollbabe* offers a bit of textual content for the aesthetic, e.g. the map and the place-names, and *Sorcerer & Sword* offers only the aesthetic standard, or, even, only states the explicit need for one. But for purposes of this discussion, neither offers the kind of content that I describe above. Therefore for purposes of arriving at new situations, the point of reference is the player-character. Situations are made, essentially, for them to land in, which leads to another split in techniques across games: whether this is done by integrating player-character concerns and features into situations to be played, or to make up the situations independently of what the player-characters are like. Either is fine in principle, but as with all techniques, one must know which one to use for this particular game.

To stay with our discussion’s needs, the bigger point is that this is how setting is made. No game “has” a setting. The setting comes about for this group as the played and experienced result of situations which “make” more backdrop into experienced phenomena. In some games that backdrop is rather detailed pre-use (i.e., textually, whether published work or via someone’s own notes). In others it exists as a standard “feel” or set of parameters, leaving the content open as a feature of situation-making only.

But! In ALL cases, the point is to examine the instrumentation. First, is there any? “Make a dungeon” is a good example. Rolling on tables is another. Looking up detailed stuff in the book, whether maps or foes or whatever, is another. But there may not be any! Even texts full of maps, tables, and foes can lack critical prose about what the **fuck** are you actually supposed to **do** with these, punting that point into some vague notions of “good GMing” which implicitly or explicitly throw you right into the trap I described above.

Second, what instrumentation is acceptable to you, for this game? What techniques are you going to accept from the text, or ignore or adjust? What techniques are you going to import to fill what you perceive as a gap in the text or to replace textual instructions that you will not use? Of those which you import, are you really considering their use as such, or are you merely “good GMing” based on habits and assumptions? Have you even really examined the text’s procedures, or do you skim them and think you’re read them but only seen what’s filling this particular parking lot in your mind?

OK, that pretty much concludes what was on my mind to cover when I read your first comment. I stress that every single thing I've said in this post and comments applies to group/collective methods just as much as to single-GM methods; let's not lose sight of that. What are your thoughts?

MANU

My first thought is that you identified a fundamental area of rpgs that is never really discussed, except in very general terms, for example I often complain that most rpgs don't actually tell you how to play them. Now you've provided a concrete vocabulary so we can discuss the specifics of "what happens next", and hopefully identify useful techniques and procedures both for play, design, and pedagogy. It's worthy of a seminar, I'm thinking; I'm very curious to see how others approach the details here.