LORENZO

The relationship between background and situation for me becomes especially intense when the "what now?" question emerges. A solid background allows to have easier answers and provides constraints and limitations to everyone involved.

In my latest Pathfinder game we encountered this several times. We often found ourselves faced with vastly diverging interests among players, and more than once with a sense of "having lost the thread" once the situation the DM had carefully prepared was over. To put it bluntly, once the exciting horror setpiece involving the players getting trapped in an abandoned town overrun by ghouls with a squad of orcish mercenaries hunting for them at the same time was over, "what now?" hit us with surprising strength and left us discombobulated.

The problem wasn't hard to read and it fundamentally mirrors what is discussed in the Mars Colony AP post: the group had fun being dragged along in that situation, and it was all fine until we were playing Indiana Jones mixed with Day of the Dead mixed with the Exorcist. But once we stepped off the ride, we had no momentum and no real contingency to pick up from. Now, the reasons for this happening are probably material for another post, but having a solid background to build situations on helped us. Players turned to what they knew about the region they were in, and put their finger on the map and said "we may find out more about that thing here" - that thing being something they weren't terribly interested into before, but the swamp in the middle of the forest filled with cannibals worshiping witches sounded like it could become a good situation.

And I as the GM couldn't just make up new stuff because that background information forced my hands several times, slapping my hand many times as I reached for a convenient situation that "made sense" or "was interesting".

This constant situation-hopping made the experience bearable for me (I was struggling with the rules of the game, in all honesty, in the same way as I struggled running any D&D5E game) but it ended up feeling like we running a procedural show, and not a serial. Here's the same cast of characters, with a new problem of the week, monster of the week, love interest of the week, drama of the week.

And I found that players eventually lamented the absence of that really strong "storyline" that made the answer to the question "What now?" a resounding "There, of course!".

Going back to your statement about situation hopefully affecting background, I feel that was the missing piece. And the super-solid background information became an enemy there. Things got better when I started disposing of really important NPCs due to the player's actions. They didn't feel like the wendigo roaming the countryside was their problem, and so the warrior queen went after it, and it wasn't pretty. The really ancient rune giant with multiple ties with all the most relevant "antagonists" in their current situation pissed them off, and they ended up killing him, and that in turn forced a huge change of scenery and a power vacuum that will lead to new stories. It wasn't enough and it probably wasn't even good, but it was something.

So despite my failures running that game I still feel like I can draw a few useful conclusions. Situations are what the game is about, but there needs to be something that ties one to the other, a form of contingency, a strong sense of consequence that gives whoever gets to answer the "What now?" question a solid base to work on. This is easier the more play is focused on people playing their characters for the sake of playing their characters - something that has been often described as "selfish" in certain circles, for reasons I'll never agree with or even understand.

But when the players expect that the answer to the "what now?" question is not simply left to the whims of their characters but is also dictated by that flow of consequences that go from situation to background (ie they want "a story"), then things short-circuit easier, at least for me.

NOAH

Your point about "procedural" structures is really interesting to me, Lorenzo.

In the context of the Burning Wheel game I'm playing with Sam and my brother, we have two main characters who are in different parts of the world and haven't encountered each other yet. Without intending it, my brother's character has found himself in a furious sword-and-sorcery short story that would fit right in with Fafhrd & the Grey Mouser. Sam's character is in a much more novelistic, contemplative and psychological narrative, closer to Earthsea in pace.

Both are great, but the paces emerged without anyone controlling them from how the dice fell and situations developed. I'm curious how much a group can elect to pursue a procedural vs novelistic structure before play, or if this is always going to be dependent on how the non-GM-players engage with the situation and what kind of constraints the game imposes.