



THE 36 PLOTS

Loren J. Miller

This is a repost of the article I posted in the summer about the 36 basic plots. It is based on my interpretation of a book by Georges Polti called **The 36 Basic Plots** or something similar.

Some folx have been complaining about plotted games, and I have come to speak out in defense of plot, to show that plotted games aren't that bad, and to share some nice tools to help you plot stories.

Assuming a rpg is like a story, what are the different structural parts of the story and how do they work in the rpg?

1. Plot. Basic form of the story, includes major incidents and encounters.
Decided by the GM. Subplots can be partially or totally the work of players.
2. Conflict and Strategy. How do the PCs go about solving their problems?
3. Character. The GM provides lots of characterization, players still provide the bulk of all characterizations.
4. Dialogue. Jointly the job of players and GM, though mostly the players' job.
5. Setting & Theme. The GM's job.

Those who argue against storytelling within rpgs seem to say the GM's only jobs are setting and character (and maybe dialogue) and plot isn't important, much like slice of life writers argue with more traditional writers over the proper structure of short stories.

I don't agree, though I can't give a short reason why. Instead, I'll look at how to construct a plot for a story and how it would be done in a rpg. First, the 36 dramatic plots.



I think I must have sent these plot patterns out to every list I'm on by now, if you've seen them before, sorry...

Each short plot description starts with the title of the plot pattern. After a hyphen the main characters to be found in the plot are given, separated by commas.

1. Supplication - Persecutor, Suppliant, a Power in Authority
2. Deliverance - Unfortunates, Threatener, Rescuer
3. Revenge - Avenger, Criminal
4. Vengeance by Family upon Family - Avenging Kinsman, Guilty Kinsman, Relative
5. Pursuit - Fugitive from Punishment, Pursuer
6. Victim of Cruelty or Misfortune - Unfortunates, Master or Unlucky Person
7. Disaster - Vanquished Power, Victorious Power or Messenger
8. Revolt - Tyrant, Conspirator(s)
9. Daring Enterprise - Bold Leader, Goal, Adversary
10. Abduction - Abductor, Abducted, Guardian
11. Enigma - Interrogator, Seeker, Problem
12. Obtaining - Two or more Opposing Parties, Object, maybe an Arbitrator
13. Familial Hatred - Two Family Members who hate each other
14. Familial Rivalry - Preferred Kinsman, Rejected Kinsman, Object
15. Murderous Adultery - Two Adulterers, the Betrayed
16. Madness - Madman, Victim
17. Fatal Imprudence - Imprudent person, Victim or lost object
18. Involuntary Crimes of Love - Lover, Beloved, Revealer
19. Kinsman Kills Unrecognised Kinsman - Killer, Unrecognised Victim, Revealer
20. Self Sacrifice for an Ideal - Hero, Ideal, Person or Thing Sacrificed
21. Self Sacrifice for Kindred - Hero, Kinsman, Person or Thing Sacrificed
22. All Sacrificed for Passion - Lover, Object of Passion, Person or Thing Sacrificed
23. Sacrifice of Loved Ones - Hero, Beloved Victim, Need for Sacrifice
24. Rivalry Between Superior and Inferior - Superior, Inferior, Object
25. Adultery - Deceived Spouse, Two Adulterers
26. Crimes of Love - Lover, Beloved, theme of Dissolution
27. Discovery of Dishonor of a Loved One - Discoverer, Guilty One
28. Obstacles to Love - Two Lovers, Obstacle
29. An Enemy Loved - Beloved Enemy, Lover, Hater
30. Ambition - An Ambitious Person, Coveted Thing, Adversary
31. Conflict with a God - Mortal, Immortal



- 32. Mistaken Jealousy - Jealous One, Object of Jealousy, Supposed Accomplice, Author of Mistake
- 33. Faulty Judgement - Mistaken One, Victim of Mistake, Author of Mistake, Guilty Person
- 34. Remorse - Culprit, Victim, Interrogator
- 35. Recovery of a Lost One - Seeker, One Found
- 36. Loss of Loved Ones - Kinsman Slain, Kinsman Witness, Executioner

RPG scenarios IMHO too often tend to be Daring Enterprises: The PCs bravely go on a quest to bring back some priceless relic and enough gold to give a hundred horses hernias. I like to use other plots though, they make me think up better, more original, gaming scenarios.

To use these things, sometime in your planning, pick one of the 36 plots to use for your adventure. Then choose the main characters who are necessary for that plot. Say you choose Ambition as the basic plot (how Shakespearean :-)) and decide that the players are going to be the ambitious person(s) (not a far stretch for most PCs). The Adversary is to be the main opposition to the PCs, so make it a wealthy, travelled businessman with his own bodyguards and quite a bit of fighting skill himself, so the PCs won't kill him out of hand to solve their problem.

Also give him good features, something that will make the players sympathize with him. Maybe he's the father of a boy or girl who is in love with one of the PCs. The coveted thing is pretty easy to figure, find something that one of the PCs wants enough to start laying plans to gain it. Also give the ambitious PC a friend who supports her ambition and keeps tempting her further into the messy situation.

Example: Most campaigns have a player who loves to play politics, involve her in this. Assume for the sake of argument that the goal is the office of district attorney. Enigma has ambitions to be the DA, the chief force for justice in Gotham. He is opposed by Buck Stevens, son of the founder of Stevens Brick Co., which is the second largest employer in Gotham. Darla Stevens is in love with the Enigma's alter ego, Bing Strawberry, and keeps telling him he ought to get in politics and make sure her slimy brother doesn't achieve political office ... etc etc etc you get the idea.

That's a skeletal plot, right there, but it's enough to guide the rest of the adventure. The acts in the plot almost write themselves:

1. The Enigma discovers that candidates must turn in petitions with 1000 names in order to register for the election, and he blew it off so long that he



needs to get them all **tonight**, to be turned in at 8 am tomorrow morning (where do you get 1000 valid signatures at this time of the night?)

2. The primaries, mostly complicated by tedium although this is a good time for enemies to show up with embarrassing photos in hand
3. Election season, complicated by reporters who circle, vulture-like, over the troubled campaign HQ, and by a televised public debate between the candidates
4. The election and the aftermath — did the PC win? what will happen to the party now? what if the press finds out about the vampires the party staked a few years ago in the abandoned buildings in the ghetto? what about the crook who recognizes Enigma's voice and threatens to publicise his secret identity?

Complications can be created by the GM from various PCs' friends and enemies, and several very interesting ethical dilemmas can be emphasized in the game, making this type of scenario wonderful ground for roleplaying, and a natural for fisticuffs and other conflict (though it would cause big problems with the press and voters if the candidate hurt or killed someone, or were even suspected of it!).

See also: [Loren's Home Page](#)

Copyright © 1994 by [Loren J. Miller](#)

Site design by [Brandon Blackmoor](#)

Last updated 27 June 1998

