



# RESPONSE TO FREE FORM GAMES AN INTRODUCTION

Jeff Diewald

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*This is a post made to the [rec.games.frp.live-action](http://rec.games.frp.live-action) newsgroup in response to a posting of Andrew Rilstone's excellent introductory guide to interactive drama. Jeff Diewald is well known for his high quality murder mystery scenarios.*

Re: Free Form Games - An Introduction  
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In article <802972979.56648@minster.york.ac.uk>, [gtm100@minster.york.ac.uk](mailto:gtm100@minster.york.ac.uk) writes:

*There are two types of RPing. Gaming and freeforming. Here is an introduction to free form games:*

Andrew & Gwaredd - a nice description, but I'd amend this a bit. There are many, many flavors of role playing games. (Sometimes, I think there's at least one different type for each combination of game masters out there...)



I write and run live role-playing murder mysteries games. Take a look at <http://www.prairienet.org/~gpeck/jeff.htm> for much more information. (You should also take a look at <http://www.prairienet.org/~gpeck/homepage.htm> for other flavors of role playing games.)

[Editor's Note: The above sites are no longer around, you can find an archive of the Murder FAQ elsewhere on this site though. - B.D.P.]

Remember - to each his or her own. Everyone's game is different, and that's fine. I've played in games of this style as well as my own.

Now - here's a few other perspectives.

*Each player becomes one character and is given a very detailed description of that character - their aims, their ambitions, what they know about other PCs and so on. The only rule of the game is that each player must play the part of the character they've been given for the duration of the senario, and never step out of character.*

We've found the last bit (never stepping out of character) can be too intense for some beginners. I offer the "green ribbon" rule we use. Everyone carries a piece of green ribbon somewhere on their person. (It's green for historical reasons, but actually hasn't been green in quite some time.) If a character is holding a green ribbon, it means:

- they're out of character
- they aren't there (with all the implications that has)

We've found this especially useful when someone needs to speak to a GM, and the GM is also playing a character.

*And unlike conventional LRP, which can range over a whole wood, freeform games are generally limited to one or two rooms.*

Or a house and yard...

*You may think this would be dull compared with a more traditional, open-ended game. And it's adventure will have much less actual action than an over-the-table game or traditional live-action adventure [aka modular - Gwaredd]. But this doesn't necessarily make them dull - just the contrar: slam-bang action is replaced with role playing and character interaction.*



We pack an awful lot into one of our games, with no combat. (Sorry, we don't do "stick jockey" stuff.) If you're not blackmailing someone, or double-crossing someone, or trying to sneak into a safe, or ... - well, then you haven't read your character sheet closely enough. If the game is done well, then there's always something else to do...

*In a freeform game, you could play any one of the following characters.*

- *An undercover police officer in a cyberpunk world, who's trying to find an escaped replicant in a sleazy bar full of bikers and drug dealers; or the replicant, or the leader of one of the cycle gangs - or even the barman, who must want to make sure there's no trouble. There are no NPCs in freeforming, remember!*
- *A notorious pirate, who's visiting the lair of a powerful bandit lord in order to attend a great council of thieves and criminals - or a spy from the king who's risked his life to attend that same council.*
- *A rock'n'roll star from the far future, who finds himself marooned in deep space along with Pontiff of the Intergalactic Church, the dictator of a nearby planet, and three strange aliens, when the luxury starliner they're travelling on malfunctions [Hmm, sounds familiar - Gwaredd]*

*As you can see, the typical freeform puts players into situations in which they'll be required to intrigue, back-stab or just plain role play, where they have to talk to other characters. And so long as they stay in character, they can do whatever they like.*

It can also be more "mundane" in setting. The American Embassy in 1989, a Rock & Roll Christmas party, and so on. It can also be exotic - like 1920s Cairo, Egypt. It can also be downright strange. In one game, I knew a character who'd written a paper on "In-line Skate Trauma in Bipedal Cthonians" ;- ) Cthuloids on roller-blades...

*Why Run a Freeform?*

*Freeform games are fun. The kick of dressing up as a barbarian, walking into a room laid out like a tavern, pounding your fist on the bar and saying 'Ale, bar-keep!' is not something you often get out of conventional games.*

Amen!



*At a more serious level, freeform games can encourage a depth of role playing you don't often get in table-top RPGs. A freeformer is their designated character from the moment they step into the room to the moment the game is over; everything the player does, their character does too. This means that freeform players can really get involved in roleplaying their characters.*

You betcha!

*On a lighter note, if all the players have come in costume freeform games can be very spectacular events. When you're standing with 30 other players all of whom have their faces painted green and are dressed in furs, you don't have to imagine what an orcish lair would look like - you're there!*

If you're doing this at someone's home, and might go outside, please alert your neighbors beforehand!

*Finally, because freeform games are completely systemless, they're a great way to introduce new players to the hobby. I know people who like the idea of playing the roles of fantasy of SF characters but hate the thought of dice and rulebooks. Freeform games are an ideal way of showing those people what fun role gaming can be [See Comment 1 at the end - Gwaredd].*

Hmmm. There are always rules of some sort, so be careful here. This also depends on the flavor of the game. I've played in games where there are GMs free-floating, to answer questions and to drive the action. This can be very successful. In my games, I try to minimize the need for a GM as much as possible, so that I can play a full role. This also works, but there are still rules.

### *Writing Your Own Freeform*

*Enough hype. Supposing you want to give freeform gaming a try: how do you go about it? As referee, the most important part of your job is to write the senario. This means writing out detailed character sheets for every player character in the game. Most table-top RPG referees I know ad lib odd bits of their senario, and some make the whole thing up as they go along - but in freeforming, everything has to be done in advance.*

Never underestimate the time it takes to write a good senario. It will always take longer...



*If you've devised an interesting set of characters, with lots of connections, quarrels, disagreements and secrets, you'll have a good freeform. If you botch it, everyone is going to be very bored. The first thing to do is to decide on the setting for your game. Choose the genre of freeform you want to run - science fiction? Fantasy? Cyberpunk? - then come up with a single-room setting [or group of room, depending on where you'll be running it - Gwaredd].*

Time, place and genre are all important. Some things are easier to run than others. It's very hard, for example, to run and control magic. I've seen it done with some success, but only rarely. Most of the time, magic causes actions to grind to a halt. The same is true of future tech.

I try to keep my games simple. My advice to new writers is to do the same. Your third or fourth game can test the complicated frills.

Settings will also tell you who might be there.

*Next, you need to decide on the basic theme of the game and who all the main characters are going to be. A freeform plot has got to be fairly complicated: ideally, every PC should need to talk to every other PC in order to sort out what's going on. As referee, the best approach is to take a simple idea for a plot and then complicate it as much as you can. An example ought to show how relatively easy this can be:*

*Suppose we've decided to run a high fantasy freeform, set in a medieval world full of political intrigue. The setting is to be the great hall of the kings palace where more ordinary folk can bring there petitions to the King.*

*A basic idea for such a game might go something like this:*

*Good King Thomas has recently died, leaving his son, Prince Richard to inherit the throne. All the nobles of the kingdom have gathered to witness his coronation. But Prince Richard is a very nasty piece of work, and many people in the kingdom think that his younger brother, Prince Harold, would make a better king,*

*This is a good straightforward theme, which already gives us two main characters - bad Prince Richards and good Prince Harold. But a simple conflict between a good prince and a bad prince is far too simple for a freeform game*

*So let's see if we can start to complicate the game shall we?*

*Although many common people and some nobility would like Prince Harold on the throne, he's completely loyal to his brother: as far as he's concerned, if Richards the eldest son, he must be allowed to be king.*

*That mean that at least some of the senario will involve the novles trying to persuade Prince Harold to start a rebellion against his brother - and Harold having to decide whether he ought to warn Richard ir not. Character interaction of this sort is what freeforms are all about. But this is still too simple, so I'll introduce another level into the plot:*

*"Prince Harold is betrothed to maryy Lady Mary. But Mary's brother was recently murdered by one of Richard's men over some insult of other. To make matters worse, Sir Fredrick, another of Richard's men, is also in love with Lady Mary, and will stop at nothing to make her his bride."*

*From such a simple plot idea we have already generated basic ideas for the following characters:*

- *Prince Richard*
- *Prince Harold*
- *A Nobleman who wants Harold to be King*
- *Lady Mary*
- *The man who killed Mary's Brother*
- *Sir Frederick*

*As referee you just carry on adding characters until you have one for each player. It's difficult to run an interesting freeform with less than ten players - 20 or more is ideal.*

Now repeat the process with a new set of plots. Harold and the nobleman who wants Harold to be King have a disagreement about a plot of land. Can they resolve it, or will it drive the nobleman into the other camp? Run down the list, and add complications from this plot. All of a sudden, that loyalty might be in question, and that will make the role-playing even more interesting.

Do it again, with another plot. Spread the plots around. Make sure that everyone is involved in a couple, with cross purposes in some and alliances in others.

*Every character should be connected in some way to several other characters, and have some interest in at least one of the plots that is going on. This is vitally important: there can be no minor characters in freeforms.*

In my games, each character is involved in \*many\* plots. It keeps 'em guessing...

*Of course, Prince Richard might be more important than, say the humble serving lad, but if the serving lad doesn't have major plots as well no-one will want to play him. No-one wants to play a character who's just a butler. But if that butler is trying to hide his best friend in the castle, because this friend has been accused of murder, the character would suddenly become interesting to play. Perhaps the butler has dressed his best friend up as a serving lad - and perhaps one of the noble guests at the feast was a witness to the murder .. see how easy it is to confuse people. Once you've established who all the characters are, it then remains to write out the character sheets telling players everything they need to know about their characters and the game's background.*

You may want to write some "lesser" characters nonetheless. I always have a couple for the neophytes in the game. The last thing you want to do is overwhelm someone.

### *Running Your Freeform*

*The referee doesn't control a freeform game in the way he does a table-top game - that's the main reason they're called freeforms! Once the character sheets are written it's the players who are in control of the game.*

This is the most important point! There are many times you might think you should intervene. Don't! Let the game go as it will, because you never know what might turn up...

*But there are still plenty of things for the referee to worry about. The first thing for the referee to decide is whether or not they want to play a character. Some freeforms referees prefer to stay out of costume, acting only as an observer and umpire - as they would be in a main stream LRP game. But the more successful your game is, the less the referee will have to do. The perfect freeform would just about run itself, and there's not much point in the referee sitting about doing nothing! So when I referee freeform games I generally take a part of an important and powerful character, but one who's not involved in many of the plots and intrigues. In the court intrigue scenario described above, I might play the part of an archbishop whose job it is to crown the new king and act as master of ceremonies.*



*This would put me in a position where I, as referee can exercise some control over the direction the game is taking without stepping out of character and detract from the atmosphere. It's much better for the archbishop to say 'You knights - put your swords away! How dare you quarrel before the king!' than for the referee to say 'Time out. Sorry, no fighting please, it's against the rules.'*

Again - if people are playing their parts, you, as a GM, won't have to do this, because the appropriate characters will...

*When is the referee likely to have to intervene in the game? I have found that the three most difficult parts of freeforming are The Beginning, The Middle and The End*

### *The Beginning*

*There can sometimes be a very embarrassing half-hour at the beginning of a freeform game where the players stand around staring at each other, and can't think of anything to do.*

*The first way to avoid this problem is to stagger the arrival times of the players. If your freeform is to kick off at 6 pm have some characters arrive at 6:15, some at 6:30 and so on. Each new group of characters ought to come as a surprise to at least some of the others, and this uncertainty should keep people interested and on their toes throughout the awkward initial stage of the game.*

*It also helps to have some specific even planned to happen near the beginning of the scenario, shortly after all the characters have arrived. This need not be anything too dramatic: it might be something as simple as, say announcing that all the main characters must formally introduce themselves before the king - or perhaps an important plot revelation.*

*In our hypothetical court intrigue scenario, it might be a good idea for the player characters not to know about the death of the old king. In that case, the freeform would begin with the various nobles and other characters arriving, expecting to pay their respects to the old man. Three-quarters of an hour into the game, the referee - in the roll of archbishop - announces that the king is dead. A revelation like that is usually enough to get everyone role playing.*

My advice: start it off with a bang. Stage something between one or more of the characters. Also, we often use "arrival information" - an envelope you get when you get to the game that says something interesting and instructs the character to





some action. For example: "Surprise, you've just recognized so-and-so as the murderous lout who killed your brother. Accuse him in front of everyone!"

### *The Middle*

*Freeforms can also get bogged down at the halfway point. All the characters have introduced themselves to each other and the first stage of interaction and intrigue are over. At this point, players can be running out of things to do.*

*Again, it's useful if the referee has some event planned up his sleeve. Using our example once more, it might be that halfway through the scenario the archbishop announces it's time for Prince Richard's coronation. This means that all the various power blocks will have to make their moves quickly, or it will be too late. It also means that the second half of the game will be a little different from the first half - because one or other of the brothers will be king, and will have to decide what to do with his newfound power.*

*If this approach fails, the referee may be required to 'cheat' slightly. If a freeform is becoming boring [heaven forbid - Gwaredd], it can quite often be livened up if the referee simply whispers to a number of player characters something like 'it's time to make a move - if you think you know who the murderer is accuse him; if you're going to challenge your old enemy to a duel, do it in the next few minutes!' At least two or three PCs will heed this advice and take some dramatic action - and the event will suddenly be on its feet again.*

Timing, timing, timing! Have a number of planned encounters built into the game. That mysterious telegram from Singapore or the revelation that someone isn't who they say they are. You can instruct the characters beforehand, use a timed envelope like the arrival information, or just make sure that enough people have a reason to blab important dirt so that it will eventually get to the right character.

### *The End*

*If you're lucky, the scenario sometimes comes to a dramatic end all by itself, with no help from the referee. Someone pulls out a sword - a brief skirmish develops. Several noblemen are dead - the murderers flee - the king's knights pursue them: the meeting has broken up'*

*Once most of the PCs have left the room, the game is obviously over, although it's often fun to call the players back together and ask them what they did after they left - what happened to them 'off stage' after the party broke up.*



*Another approach which occasionally works is for the referee to take the roll of very minor character in the game - a man-at-arms or a servant, say. When the referee wants to finish the session, he can slip out of the room, change costumes and re-enter.*

*In one of my freeforms, I spend the bulk of the game playing a mad jester. Half an hour before I wanted the game to finish, I slumped out of the rooms and changed costumes, and entered as the Evil Dark Lord - which brought the scenario to a pretty apocalyptic conclusion; in another, a pirate tavern emptied in three seconds flat when the governor arrived. In a freeform set in a tavern, of course, it's possible for the referee to end the game by calling 'time'. In a more courtly game the king might decide it was time to leave. If all else fails, the referee can wind things up by turning out the lights on and loudly shouting 'Cut!' or 'Time Out'.*

Or - in a murder mystery, the detective can call everyone back into the room in order to let everyone know what he or she has figured out. Can you arrest the right person?

### *Help and Advice*

*Finally a few pieces of practical advice:*

- *Make sure that there aren't too many weapons around; otherwise the whole thing can quickly degenerate into a very short barroom brawl. In a tavern, it might be that the bouncer takes weapons off all characters as they come in; in a formal game players might have to present their weapons to the king. The odd duel or fight can make these games very lively, but 30 people duelling in one room is chaotic and possibly dangerous.*

It depends on the kind of weapon you have in mind. I remember one "quiet" murder mystery where someone asked (after the end) who was armed. The ensuing display of guns, knives, blackjacks and other implements of damage was quite impressive. It was in character - but it was also in character not to use it. Remember, murder is not an easy act - and it leaves a lot of traces. You shouldn't do it recklessly - and you can make it clear in the character sheets that this is so.

- *I normally arrange for some sort of refreshments at my freeforms. I always enforce a no alcohol rule - it's bad enough to referee someone who's pretending to be drunk without them getting tipsy for real.*

This depends on your players. We always try to cater our games, because they last all day - and the food is another element of realism that can add to the environment. (Egyptian food and high tea at a British officer's house in Cairo... yum!) We do have wine - but usually people are so busy role-playing that it hasn't been a problem.

- *And finally, I never allow cameras into my games - I can't think of a better way of ruining the atmosphere. I generally arrange a photocall after the game is over so people have records of all their wonderful costumes.*

Or, if the time and place are right, write a character in with a camera. We've even videotaped some of our action - people are so busy that they don't even notice before long. Whatever you do, do arrange for some kinds of pictures...

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