



# FREEFORM DESIGN

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*This is a classic primer that has been around for some time. Robert Prior is considered by many to be - if not the, at least one of - Australia's top freeform designers. While this brief essay is a bit dated, it still reflects an important writer's philosophy and presents helpful techniques for the interactive dramatist. Questions about the content should be directed to [Robert Prior](#). This material is archived here with the permission of the author.*

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## DESIGN

This is the way I design freeforms. That does not mean that this is the only way to design them, just that it works for me. Something else to remember is that I am continually experimenting, sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. That is the price you pay, i.e. do not be afraid to try something new.

One of my pet hates is poor production values. A game that looks good and that the writer has obviously put effort into preparing will be better received by players than hand written character sheets and total disorder. While I have never used hand written sheets, I have been guilty of total disorder.

When I write a freeform I do things in the following order

1. Decide on the theme, number of sessions and number of characters
2. Decide on some characters that fit the theme
3. Work out a story that fits those characters together
4. Add any other characters necessary to fit into the story
5. Do a rough draft of the rules, calculate character statistics if any



6. Work out character objectives
  7. Adjust the rules to fit into the objectives
  8. Write the characters personality and background
  9. Adjust the objectives to fit in with the personality and background
  10. Balance the characters
  11. See if all the objectives are achievable and adjust the rules and/or objectives as necessary
  12. Write the GM notes
  13. Produce all the bits
  14. Make sure everything is well presented
  15. Stuff envelopes etc.
  16. Sleep or die depending
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## DECISIONS

Before you start designing a freeform there are a number of decisions that need to be made about just what you intend to write.

### 1) HOW MANY SESSIONS YOU WANT IT TO RUN FOR

The number of sessions affects:

- the number of GM's you need
- the number of players it is for
- the style of freeform
- the complexity of the freeform

### 2) HOW MANY GM'S DO YOU NEED

As a rule of thumb the minimum number of GM's you need is one per ten players, the maximum is one per five. It may seem silly to have a maximum limit but if you have too many it will be impossible to co-ordinate them and they will be giving out contradictory information. I have run a 100 person freeform with two people and this worked quite well, however, it only worked because the game ran itself, the more complex the game the more GM's you need.

### 3) HOW MANY PLAYERS IS IT FOR

Approximately 20 - 30 people is a fair number for a one session freeform. The more sessions it is for and the more complex it is, the more players you should include. 20

is too few for a three session freeform, it will not be complex enough to keep them all involved.

The number of players should also be based on the number you expect to play. It is very difficult to run a freeform with players missing, they leave holes in the plot.

#### **4) STYLES OF FREEFORMS**

The following are seven basic styles of freeform. The more complex the freeform the more of the seven it will incorporate. Freeforms tend to be a mixture of a few of the styles e.g. *The Renaissance Conspiracy Freeform* was an *Intrigue*, *Economic*, *Political*, *Trading* and *Figure* game.

#### **HUMOROUS**

The simplest style of freeform and the easiest to GM, but for me the hardest to write. A humorous freeform sets up characters and situations where people can be silly and not worry too much about rules and objectives, e.g. *Treachery in Wonderland*, *Hello Hello*, and *Bunnies and Burrows*.

#### **INTRIGUE**

This style involves a large number of sub plots. The objectives are to find out information and to get specific objects. Everyone has secrets they are trying to hide and others that they are trying to find out. A trap to avoid with this sort of freeform is not including a mechanism for information to be discovered against someone's will and not to make it destructive for a player if the information does come out. Examples include *Halloween 666*, *Ship to Nowhere*.

#### **POLITICAL**

Players trying to get position in a formal power structure. Here groupings and support from other players is vital to success. Having a number of "committees" works very well. Having one overall leader or central character is a disaster. The central character will be run off their feet and have too much power, the other players will feel that they have no chance to do something independently or to play a significant part in the game. Example includes *Tarsh*.

#### **ECONOMIC**

This style of game concentrates more on player to GM or to world than on player to player interaction, although this will also be prominent. An economic game does not

necessary involve money, it means a game where players actions affect the external world and this results in them gaining some advantage e.g. *Shanghai Trader*.

## MODULE

A module freeform has a normal freeform of any of the other styles and also mini modules where players form groups and go off to play a table game. There are a lot of problems with this sort of freeform. For a start it is a lot of work to write. Players will churn through a large number of mini modules, all of which can only be used once. It is also very easy for the freeform to fall below critical mass (q.v.). Another difficulty is balancing the benefits to the players for going on the modules and playing the freeform. If they do not gain anything from the freeform it will simply turn into a place where people wait before they go on a module, if more can be gained from the freeform than from the modules people will not bother with them. *Bolt Hole*, *Narnia* and most freeforms run at early Cancons were of this sort.

## TRADING

Players trying to get things, cards, bits, items etc. from each other. For this to work there has to be a large variety of possible things and the trades need to involve a lot of people instead of simple two players swapping things. The things traded have to be useful in their own right so they can get used up and therefore generate demand e.g. *The Eye*.

## FIGURE

The use of something, metal figure, game counters etc., to represent: where players are, where their armies are, etc. This is more a game mechanic rather than a style of freeform but it does dramatically change the way the freeform is played, e.g. *Pendragon*, *Dradon*, *Ravens Nest*.

## 5) COMPLEXITY

The complexity of the freeform will be determined by all the other things.

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## OTHER DECISIONS

There are other considerations for writing which have more to do with personal feelings and beliefs. There is no CORRECT decision to be made in these matters, it is all a question of personal preferences.

## **INTERNAL V/S EXTERNAL INFORMATION**

Is all the information that is going to be used in the game, already in the game, on character sheets etc. or is there more information that can be found out, e.g. searching rooms etc., ie asking a GM once a required action has been undertaken.

## **INVISIBLE GM'S, VISIBLE GM'S, PLAYING GM'S,**

### **PLANTS AND DIRECTED CHARACTERS**

#### **INVISIBLE GM's**

A GM who acts as a GM who is not supposed to be there and who players are supposed to ignore.

#### **VISIBLE GM's**

A GM who has an identified role in the game e.g. servants, androids etc.

#### **PLAYING GM's**

GM's who also have characters and/or objectives.

#### **PLANTS**

GM's that are not identified as such, people who are to ensure that things happen in a certain way.

#### **DIRECTED CHARACTERS**

Players with full characters and objectives that the GM's can trust and who will accept it when told that in two hours they will commit suicide etc.

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## **RULES**

The rules have to be as simple and quick as possible. Players have neither the time or the interest to read pages of rules and information. The rules have to be easy enough to understand quickly and fast enough not to get in the way. If some rules only affect a few players it is only necessary for those players to know them. It is more important for players to know how the world is run rather than know specifics that do not affect them. The rules should reflect the Theme.

Rules do not need to be written down if they are simple to remember. For example in the *Hello Hello* freeform run at Sydcon, the rules for that game were "if it fits in with the sort of thing people were doing on the show, no matter how ridiculous, it worked. If it did not fit the style, it did not work."

Design the rules for the game played. There are a lot of similarities in the rules I use in my games but I tailor them to style of game I am running and to the feel I want to generate.

If a game mechanic requires GM intervention, there must be a limit on how many times it is used. I have tried cards for the skill used up when the skill is used, an ability that can be used only a limited number of times in a game, GM use cards where a player has many abilities but a limited number of times s/he can use an ability, all these work. The thing to remember is to use the system that best fits into the game being played.

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## THINGS TO CONSIDER

### DEATH

Are you going to allow death in your game? If you do and someone dies what will you do. If you do not want death how will you stop it. Personally I try to stop anyone dying until the last half hour of the game. That way a player who dies does not feel as if he/she has missed on playing and has no chance of winning. If a player dies in the last half hour I have them die, they can watch but not participate. If they die earlier than that there has to be some way of getting them back into the game without nullifying the effort the murderer put into killing him or her.

### MONEY

Not all games need money. If it is in the game it should have a use. This use must take it out of the game if there is a way of getting more money into the game. I have played a game that ran 600% inflation per half hour because money was easy to get and had no way of leaving the game.

### CHARACTER SHEETS

For most games the character sheet need only be one page. The maximum length you would want for any game is one page per session. Remember that the longer the

character sheet, the more people have to remember and read before they can start playing.

## **I THINK THAT A CHARACTER SHEET SHOULD HAVE**

### **1) PERSONALITY**

Personality could be a few words, you are the town drunk, to a few paragraphs. All characters **MUST** be "ROLE-PLAYABLE". We are all role-players, we like having fun with the characters we are playing, so we need something to do, some quirk or personality we can play. Avoid the Quiet characters who are dark and mysterious and do not say much. In a tournament, the players who have this sort of character could play it very well and no one, not even the GM's will notice. It is not fair on them. This does not mean that you can not have a secret manipulator only that they should have some CHARACTER to play as well.

### **2) KNOWLEDGE**

What the player knows about things, events and people. In some games this is the most important part of a character sheet. This could, but does not necessary need to, include background.

### **3) POWER**

Every player must have the ability to achieve their objectives. Power is something in addition to knowledge. Generally it relates to the rules or bits etc. but it could be anything. Power is especially important for the inexperienced player who does not know what to do ie talk to people, it gives them a place to start. Powers should vary from player to player and should be balanced as much as possible ie the King has power because of his position, therefore the Servant should have skills, possessions connection etc. that gives him as many things to do and as many ways to achieve his objectives as the king. Another way of balancing this is to make the servants objectives easier etc.

### **4) OBJECTIVES**

Players need clear guidelines about what they are trying to do. Objectives give them a way of interacting with characters and a way of deciding if they would do something or agree with something. For this reason it is vital that the objectives are consistent with the personality and background of the character. I have found that 4 objectives is enough for a one session game, 7 for a two and 9 for a three.

All objectives should be achievable. Go through them and work out how they may be done. That is not to say that you work out the only way that something can be done, rather that you see that you have not left any holes in your game.

No objective should be totally dependent on another player ie. do not say: marry Fred, say marry a noble etc. If Fred does not want to get married or marries someone else, the first player is blocked and will get frustrated.

Always ensure that there is more than one way of achieving an objective ie the crown can be won, stolen, gained by trade etc.

### **AVOID NULLS - a null as an objective that is**

- not achievable or not under the players control e.g. stop someone finding out that you murdered your father, a player has no control over this, freeforms are about information, you can not stop information coming out, besides if the information does not come out then whole plot lines do not work. Better to say frame X for the murder or get pardoned etc.
- would happen anyway ie telling the drunk to roleplay drunk. Better to say get the special wine.
- are meaningless e.g. have fun.
- are too general e.g. make mischief.

### **A CHARACTER SHEET COULD ALSO HAVE**

#### **1) A LIST OF THEIR STARTING POSSESSIONS IF ANY**

This is simply for GM convenience. When it comes to "stuffing envelopes" it is very helpful to have this information at a glance. It is also very useful in Balancing a character, and for running it again at a different time or place or when you lend it to someone.

#### **2) A SUMMERY OF SOME IMPORTANT POINTS**

This is just a quick reference guide for players.

#### **3) STATISTICS**

If the rules require statistics they should be easy to understand and players should know what is good and what is bad and have some understanding of how they compare to the average other player.

#### **4) HOW THEY RELATE TO OTHER PLAYERS**



Do they have any brothers, cousins, wives etc. and whether they like them or not. This is one where it is vital to cross reference information between character sheets.

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## **GM NOTES**

This is the hardest thing for me to write and something that I did not do for my early freeforms. It is very beneficial to have, however. A fatal flaw in a freeform is having the writer as the only GM who can make decisions. The players will be frustrated because they can not get access or because other players seem to be achieving preferred attention, the GM's will get frustrated because they can not make decisions and must continually refer back to one GM and the game will get bogged down.

## **THE GM NOTES SHOULD INCLUDE**

### **THE STORYLINE**

What is supposed to happen in the game, the planned events. A freeform should have a climax to round things off.

### **WHAT MAY HAPPEN**

The things that are likely to happen should the players play the game the way the writer thought they would or should they do something that they should not do but that the writer can see they may do. The results of players doing special things. How to achieve the more obscure objectives. This is to get it clear in your mind and also as a guide for your other GM's.

### **ANY INFORMATION THAT IS OUT OF THE GAME THAT GM'S SHOULD BE AWARE OF**

Information that you want to bring into the game or information that will affect the results of players actions. Information that GM's need to make decisions. The external information if any. The starting location of things etc.

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## GENERAL

### CRITICAL MASS

*The Definition of Critical Mass* is put here because it is very important and I do not know where else to put it. The critical mass of a freeform is the minimum number of players necessary for it to work. In all freeforms there will be players who are just mucking around and not particularly doing much even though they may be very flamboyant, there will be players who are lost and do not know what to do, there will be people who have left for a short time and there will be people doing things. People change from one group to the other continually. If there are not enough people "Doing Things" to satisfy the needs of the other people "Doing Things", the freeform will fall to bits in a bad way. People will become bored and lose interest. Once a freeform reaches this stage it is almost impossible to save.

### ENDING

When a freeform is dead, let it die. Reading a freeform is a skill that is gained with experience. Freeforms do have a definite life cycle. Once that life is over most players do not want to continue. They may have thoroughly enjoyed it but they feel that it is finished. Once this stage is reached the best thing to do is wrap it up. Players will still be more satisfied with the freeform, if they enjoyed it, even though it finished early, than they would be if a good freeform is drawn out unnecessarily.

### BITS

Bits are physical representations of the things in the game that are important. They could be in place of props, ie this piece of paper is an aeroplane or they could be game mechanics ie dice use cards. If something is obvious people should be able to see it. There is nothing worse than trying to adjudicate something when one player asks why did he not notice the 200 guards in the closet with the player he was trying to stab in the back.

### NAME TAGS

These are so useful that they should be considered mandatory. Even if characters have never met each other before the game they need some way of recognizing just who is who.

## **COSTUMES**

Costumes really help the feel of the game. Generally they are the responsibility of the players but the GM has a role to play in encouraging them and giving the players enough time and guidance to know what costume to prepare for the game. Many players put a lot of effort into their costumes and this should be rewarded.

## **PROPS**

These replace or are used in addition to bits. They really help the look and feel of the game and solve the problem of noticing things. Of course they are also more difficult and expensive to organize.

## **SUMMARY OF OTHER PLAYERS**

A useful guide both for shortening the character sheet and for telling players about people they have known for years. They have a secondary use in letting a player know if another player is acting in character or not - see *Judging*.

## **ATMOSPHERE**

The closer the freeform is to a full theatre experience the more people like it. The use of costumes, props and scenery enhances this.

From here on is not really part of this discussion so it is just summarised and included to round off the subject.

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## **RUNNING A FREEFORM**

### **GM EXPLAINING THE SETTING AND THE RULES**

A lot of the players won't have read or won't have understood the rules. This is a chance to reinforce the background and answer any questions players may have.

### **CHARACTERS INTRODUCING THEMSELVES**

So they recognise the wife they have been married to for ten years.

### **PLAY THE FREEFORM**

A major discussion all in itself.

## **TIME WARNINGS**

So players are not caught out at the end.

## **ENDING**

A freeform should have a climax to round things off.

## **PLAYER SCORING**

## **DEBRIEFING**

Players will want an opportunity to tell other players what they did. A debriefing rounds the freeform off.

## **JUDGING**

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## **JUDGING**

Judging a freeform is one of the hardest things for a GM to do. The reason for this is that a GM will not have any idea about what happened in the freeform or about who was role-playing well.

## **OBJECTIVES AND WHAT HAPPENED**

So much happens in a freeform that does not need a GM's involvement or that was handled by other GM's, that it is very difficult to find this information to judge. Unfortunately if you do not have some way of judging how people played their objectives they will become irrelevant for a number of players and all your careful balancing and cross referencing of characters will fall through. I do not have a good answer to this problem.

## **ROLE-PLAYING**

When a player speaks to a GM in a freeform it is generally an information or rules matter, it is very difficult in most instances to do this in character. All a GM really sees is how the character is role-playing when he is not role-playing. Some characters "roleplay" excessively and so are very obvious but this does not take into account or allow for those players who are being very skilful and who are not being overly loud. I generally have the players themselves judge the role-playing. By having each player vote for three others and not ranking these in any importantly a good player should be

easy to spot. The disadvantage with this system is in a freeform where players play in distinct groups that do not have much interaction with others, the scoring system will favour the best role-player in the largest group rather than the best in the game.

## GM AWARDS

A GM award for me is for me is an award for the player or players who contributed to the freeform working. They may not necessarily have achieved the most objectives or been the best roleplaying but they were always polite and informed GM's of reasons and background for wanting to do something thereby giving a GM a basis for making a decision about whether it should work, they encouraged and assisted other players thereby increasing the Critical Mass, they played in Genera as well as in Character and they generally made the game fun for everyone not just themselves. Unlike objectives this is something a GM should be on the look out for and should be reasonably apparent. If it is not apparent it is not occurring.

