STARTING A LIVE ROLEPLAYING GAME

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It was late September, 1994. I had just played my first *Mind's Eye Theatre* game at Gen Con, and I was eager to play in more. I discovered that a friend of a friend, Aaron Pavao, had also given *The Masquerade* a try at Gen Con, and was considering starting a game in Madison, Wisconsin. A few days later when I was introduced to Aaron, my first words to him were, "Let's do it."

Thus began **Madison By Night**. Two guys with little experience between them started a game that has since grown to over forty players.

We were lucky. We made some good choices early on, we have a great troupe of players who put up with our inexperience and constant refinements, and we acquired a talented staff to keep things under control.

Now we've started receiving requests for advice, mostly through email. Since we want to encourage live role-playing, we've made an effort to answer whatever questions we could. It seems that people starting a new game tend to have similar questions and concerns.

Disclaimer: While playing any type of game, there is some risk involved. Ultimately, you as a staff member are taking responsibility for anything that might happen to you or your players during the game. You should closely examine and assure yourself that you are satisfied with any risks involved before doing anything described in this document. Should there be some loss of property, injury, or emotional damage due to following this advice, the resulting responsibility is held by the staff who organized that event. Most live role-playing games are run by mature individuals who understand the inherent risks and take steps to minimize these risks are very safe, but if something bad should result, the author of this document is not responsible. It's a damn shame that we live in such a blame filled society that I need to say this.

Types of Game

Before you start anything, you'll need to make some decisions. What genre will you be using? What rules will you be using? How many players will be involved? How many staff members do you have, and how many will you need? Where is the game taking place? The answers to these questions will effect the type of game you have.

Size and Type

Size is a good place to start. How many people can you rope into playing your game? This is the most important question. Go and get some idea of how many people are interested in playing. The exact number isn't important, just a rough idea. Are you going to be running a small game of up to about twenty people or a large game with more? It's hard to set up complex inter-woven political manipulations between six players, and it's equally as hard to keep up-to- date on every character's actions in a game of sixty.

If you're going to be writing the event, mid-ranged games from fifteen to twenty people are easiest to write for. You'll have enough characters to have lots of interaction and conflicts, while a small enough group to keep track of the game. It is harder to generate the needed amount of conflict in a smaller game, and more difficult to stay on top of a larger game.

Closely related to the size of the game is the type of game. While one-shot events can be written for almost any size group, chronicles work best with small groups and on- going games work best with large groups.

One-Shots

A one-shot game is a single, self contained event. The entire story is wrapped up at the end. As a result, one-shot events require tight scripting by the staff. Each character needs to have important information and reasons to interact with other characters. There is no "next time," so you've got to handle all of the loose ends. At best, you can have a debriefing after the game where players have an opportunity to compare notes and see the larger picture.

To enforce this need for closure, and because one-shot events often have limited space, this type of event lends itself to a closed room situation. The event deals with these people in this place at this time. The characters won't be visiting multiple locations. This is not always the case - some one-shots use entire cities as their setting - but it is less common.

One-shot events are ideal for conventions and other places where you are unlikely to continue the game past the first session because a one-shot event has a clear start and finish. A one-shot event is also a good way to start running live role-playing games. It gives you a chance to try running a game without long term commitment. It's also a good way to encourage people to try out live role-playing, since they are only committed to play a single game.

Since a one-shot event has clear goals and concepts, you'll know exactly what sort of situations are likely to come up. You'll be able to use a simpler set of rules that only handle skills, abilities, and conflicts that pertain to that specific game.

On-Going Games

The most ambitious style of live role-playing game is the on-going game. An on-going game never, or only rarely, stops. When a player joins the game, they are given a character that they will be playing. They continue to play this same character until told otherwise by the staff. A player can play whenever they want, within appropriate guidelines. *Madison By Night*, for example, limits play to after dark, Thursday through Sunday.

On-going games have one key advantage over one-shot events. Over time characters are going to grow and develop. Players will become more familiar with their characters and develop richer personalities for them.

An on-going game has many problems. Since there are few places that can be designated as a permanent site for the game, most on-going games tend to be open-ended, players have a wide variety of places to play. Because players may be anywhere at any given time, it is impossible for staff to be present at every interaction between characters, meaning that players will be forced to resolve many problems among themselves. Since staff are not always present, it is easy for the game to grow out of control. When playing in this sort of situation, some sort of identification is needed to mark active players. Button and badges are relatively inexpensive and can be customized for the game.

Despite the inherent problems, an on-going game can be run successfully. For example, *Madison By Night*'s first on-going story, *The Cunning Plan*, ran continuously for almost a full year. To alleviate these problems, an on-going game will require additional preparation, and a larger staff. An on-going game generates a lot of information that needs to be cataloged, so an efficient system of storing and tracking that information needs to be developed.

Plots need to be written differently from one-shot events. When a player's character doesn't accomplish his goals one night, he can try again the next. Instead of writing tight plots that can be completed within the allotted time, in an on-going game, characters should have short and long term goals. Given the additional time, a creative plot writer can use tools such as foreshadowing.

While you have more freedom in writing plots, it is also more difficult. The biggest problems is that the staff cannot be sure which players will be playing at any given time. If the climax to a plot hinges upon two characters meeting, and their players never play at the same time, you're doomed. There are two solutions to this problem. First, don't write plots that require a specific individual. Plot for groups and types of characters instead. Second, write plots that put the player's characters at odds. By setting characters against each other and making sure that each character has several antagonists, players are more likely to encounter their nemesis when they do play. When players begin working together against their enemies, the players will quickly begin making their own sub-plots.

On-going games don't work well with small groups, especially since player characters are often set up as each others antagonists. I suggest a group of at least 25. If you have a smaller group, a chronicle may be a better idea.

On-going games require more complex rules than one-shots. You rarely know what sort of character skills will be required in four months time (let alone next month). To cover the wide variety of potential situations, you'll need a set of rules that

gives each character a wide base of skills. Since players in most chronicles expect their characters to become more experienced over time, the rules will need to allow for a logical system of character skill development. Also, because staff members will not always be present, it is important to have a set of rules that make it easy for players to determine results without a staff member. A vague set of rules will lead to many player arguments, especially when a player's character's life is on the line.

Chronicles

Simply put, a chronicle is a series of one-shots with recurring characters, or it's an on-going game with extremely limited hours. If you're familiar with traditional role-playing games, a chronicle is very similar to a campaign. Each player has a character they play at each event. After each event, you agree to meet again and have another event with the same characters at a later date.

Chronicles combine many of the advantages of one-shots and on-going games. Like a one-shot event, the staff is able to easily control how often events are held. Also like an one-shot event, because the exact time and location of the game is known, it is possible to have staff present for all important situations. However, like on-going games, chronicles encourage character development and extended plotting.

Chronicles have their own writing problems. Like a chronicle, there is a next time, so the plot doesn't necessarily need to be concluded that night. However, like a one-shot, because there is a distinct end, players are going to expect some form of closure each night. Ideally some plots will be wrapped up, and others will be waiting for the next game. Just writing a series of one-shots is okay, but can be improved by adding themes, long term goals, and stories that go beyond just that evening.

Chronicles are easier to write than one-shots. The script doesn't need to be as tight, you can make up for one character not having much to do in the next event. After a few sessions, you'll be familiar with each of the characters. Because the players generally will represent a group, you can worry less about involving each of the characters. Instead of crafting a game where each character is scripted directly in, you can script for the group of characters instead.

Chronicles break into two distinct types, large chronicles and small chronicles. A large chronicle will run almost identically to an on-going game. Plots will probably advance more slowly than an on-going game because there is a more limited amount of play time available.

Smaller chronicles tend to be more "us against them" then one-shots or on-going games. In an eight player game, it's hard to set the player characters against each other if you want the characters to return. Antagonists will usually be represented by staff members whom the characters work against. In this way, chronicles most closely echo traditional table-top role-playing.

Chronicles are generally more open ended in location then one-shots. Characters are free to visit various locations, however at all times they are watched by the staff. Although a chronicle is likely to be open ended, most chronicles physically take place in one location, such as a staff member's house which is used to represent various imaginary locations the characters might visit.

The chronicle is ideal for a small group of less than a dozen players interested in engaging in live role-playing. It also works for groups larger than twenty, where player characters can be set against each other. In a medium sized game, players can be asked to play antagonists from time to time. This will provide variety in antagonists, lessen the burden on the staff, and many players will welcome it as an opportunity to try different character types.

Rules

How are you going to resolve intra-character conflicts? If two characters get into a fight, or a fugitive attempts to leap from rooftop to rooftop, how are you going to deal with it? There are many systems, and I encourage you to look at as many as you can. I'll only cover a few of the more commonly used ones.

Mind's Eye Theatre

Developed by White Wolf Game Studio, *Mind's Eye Theatre* is a set of live role-playing rules designed around White Wolf's World of Darkness. Specific sets of rules exist to allow players to be Vampires, Mummies, Humans, and Werewolves.

The *Mind's Eye Theatre* system contains much of the complexity of a traditional table-top role-playing game, while simplifying rules for the sake of mood and speed like many card based or free form systems. The result is a curious mix of style that allows complex conflict resolution, character advancement, and a wide range of abilities at the cost of speed.

Mind's Eye Theatre does have many advantages. First, because characters have many statistics detailing their abilities, characters tend to be more versatile in the long run. Second, a character can grow in abilities over time, a necessity in a chronicle or on-going game. Third, many players are already familiar with the *Mind's Eye Theatre* system, so you don't need to teach them. Fourth, you get

rules, setting, and plot ideas provided when you purchase the system, saving you development time.

However, *Mind's Eye Theatre* does have many disadvantages. Conflict resolution is fairly slow. The large body of rules creates rules arguments and gives rules lawyers a chance to thrive. It is ideally suited to situations where a storyteller is constantly present to handle problem situations.

Freeform

No rules. It's that simple. Conflicts can be handled by either the players or the staff. If players are handling conflicts, they'll need to be mature enough handle disagreements. If the staff is, you'll need a large staff if you anticipate many conflicts.

Freeform games are best suited to situations where there are few or no conflicts. The murder mystery party is a good example. The characters aren't supposed to engage in fights or risky stunts, just investigation. In these cases the rules can be dispensed with and the players can focus on interaction and role-playing.

Card Based Systems

One solution to the joint requirements of conflict resolution and speed is the card based system. Each player has a bunch of cards indicating what their character can do. Examples would include "Seduction: Once during the game, a male character must truthfully answer one question." and "Gun: You carry a handgun. Point this card at another character and shout 'BANG'. Their character is now dead." Card based systems are fast, simple, and require almost no teaching to play. They do lack the ability to handle unexpected actions and have difficulty portraying complex situations such as a protracted fire-fight accurately. They also make character growth difficult, if not impossible.

If you are interested in running a card based game, you can investigate ready to run systems such as *Nexus* or those found in the Interactive Literature Foundation's Game Bank, or develop your own.

Locations

Where are you running your game, and what does this place represent? Depending on your event, characters might be limited to a single building, or have free reign across the world. In addition to character limitations, there are real world limitations, most importantly, where can the staff arrange for space for the game.

Closed Room

Just what it sounds like, the game is restricted to a small area, although not always a single room. Closed room games cover any situation where the characters cannot, will not, or don't want to leave. Examples are aboard a ship, in a meeting, or in an airplane. The traditional example is when the players are playing murder suspects and characters are unable to leave the crime scene until the murderer is apprehended. Staff members are always on hand and watching the players. In general, the actual closed room or building you will be using will not actually be the location of the plot. Instead you'll be using a private home or conference room at a hotel or convention center. You will need to decorate as much as possible to help everyone involved suspend disbelief.

Controlled Open Ended

In a controlled open ended game, the characters are free and expected to travel to multiple locations. This can be handled in one of two ways. First, the staff can designate various rooms at one site to be different locations. In a game run at a staff member's home, the kitchen could be a local restaurant, and the living room (with the lights off, music up loud, and a strobe light) could be the night club across town. Second, the troupe can actually travel to the locations. In this case, the troupe should either have permission to be playing there, or should not interfere with whatever 'normally' goes on at the location.

In both situations, staff members are always present to help the players and solve problems as they arise. Because players may go somewhere reasonable but unexpected, staff members will need to be ready to play almost any character and set any scene that the players require.

Open Ended

In an open ended game, the players are welcome to go wherever they like, within certain loose confines. The most important distinction between controlled open ended and open ended, is that in an open ended game, staff members are not always present to handle narration, disputes, and problems.

No game is truly open ended. Guidelines of appropriate places to play help players locate each other and help assure that a staff member, while not always present, is nearby. *Madison By Night* is an open ended game limited to downtown Madison. The game at Gen Con hosted by Midnight Capers encompassed the convention. It is also important to have some method of identifying active players in an open ended game. Most games use specially printed badges, buttons, ribbons, or pins.

In an open ended game, it is important for players to know when and where they can contact staff members should a problem arise. It's also a good idea for staff members to be present at important scenes to quickly handle any problems that arise.

Where to Play

This is often a problem for new live role-playing groups. They've expended the time and effort to create their game, but don't have a place to run it.

The simplest place is clearly someone's home. A little bit of decoration can turn a kitchen into a seedy bar, a living room into a night club and a basement into a tomb. Changing the lighting and a few good props can help players suspend disbelief. Unfortunately, many games don't have access to a house large enough for such a game.

You can play in public, but this has risks. How are you going to handle inquisitive non-players? You'll want to stay in touch with the local police to avoid any potential problems. You need to develop standard ways to handle out of game problems, and let players know these standards.

Another option is looking for free sites you can use. If some of your staff are students at a local high school or university, their school may offer free meeting space for student organizations that you can use. If your local library has meeting rooms available for community groups, you may qualify. Local restaurants and bars may be willing to donate space, especially if it means that players will be in the business, probably making purchases.

If all else fails, you can rent space. Many hotels have meeting space for small conventions available. Some hotels will let you rent several rooms for different locations. Your town may have a convention or community center with space available. Local schools also often rent space for local organizations. Look at as many options as possible, you should be able to find something to fit your needs and keep your costs down.

Set Up

Writing

No one can teach you how to write plots for a role- playing event, live-action or table-top. Hopefully I can give you a few guidelines to point you in the right direction, but ultimately you've got to write it yourself.

First, decide who is this group of individuals, and why are they coming together? Many a role-playing game has dissolved because the characters have no reason to be together. Sometimes the characters will be a cohesive group, and sometimes they'll be at each other's throat. Either way, if they won't meet, there isn't an event. Often the reason for the gathering is directly tied to the goals.

Secondly, each character needs goals. A well developed character should have at least two, one short term goal that can be accomplished by the end of the evening, and one long term goal that the character can work toward, but doesn't expect to accomplish. Additional goals of both kinds complicate life and provide options should one goal prove to be too difficult or too easy. If the group is a large one, you'll probably be writing goals that place characters in opposition. If this is the case, you'll need to give characters enough goals to ensure that they can be successful in at least one. Being foiled in every goal is very frustrating for a player.

When writing for almost any size group, you'll usually have larger goals shared by many characters. In a small game, this might be the only goal. For example, in a murder mystery game, most characters (except the murderer) share the common goal of catching the murderer. In a larger game, players might be part of factions vying for a common goal. These larger goals are often the central reason for the characters to come together. Everyone present should have an interest, either direct or indirect, in this goal.

Third, set up the "world". Just because the characters are unlikely to visit other cities and meat childhood friends doesn't mean they aren't important. Having a rough outline of the political climate in nearby cities as well as past allies and enemies for characters will prove valuable. These allies and enemies can be used to aid or hinder players who find the going too tough or too easy. A well constructed world will also show up in character depth, and help prevent the feeling that the characters didn't exist before this situation.

Fourth, tie characters together. If two characters have hated each other for years, don't just say so. Give examples, lots of examples. Of course, this will generate a lot of information for players to remember. Highlight or bold key names and incidents that a player should be certain to note. Be sure that both individuals know that they are related in some way. Few things are as embarrassing as having another player explain that his history sheet lists you as his best friend, and you've never heard of the character before!

If you're running an on-going game or chronicle, this process only needs to be done once. After that the information can be occasionally updated for new characters

and changes. If you are allowing players to design that own characters, you'll need at least an hour per character to tie the characters together and modify both character and story to fit. If you're assigning characters to players, the time commitment is about halved.

Staff

Unless you're running a very small game, you'll need fellow staff to run a live-action game. Other staff members can help write plots, write characters, assemble character packets, sign in players, and most importantly, help troubleshoot during the game.

Everyone wants to know the magic number. How many staff members do you need to run a live-action game? Unfortunately, there is no golden ratio that always works. Depending on who the staff is, how dedicated they are, the type of game, and the type of players, staff requirements will vary greatly. There are some loose guidelines, but they aren't perfect.

First, you'll definitely want at least one on-site staff member for each twenty players. No matter what. At least. And unless you're running a simple game with a very mature group of players, this will be far too few staff. As the complexity of the game increases, both in rules and plotting, you'll need more on-site staff members to iron out disputes between players. Your average small *Mind's Eye Theatre* game works with a minimum of one on-site staff member per ten players. As the number of players increases, the number of possible clashes also increases, and the ratio continues to drop. One staff for each eight players seems to be a absolute minimum for *Mind's Eye Theatre* games over thirty people. When you're not familiar with the players, or have less mature players present, the ratio drops even lower, about one in seven.

A one-shot event can be handled by one person per twenty players, given a lot of time. Chronicles ought to cut this ratio in half, and on-going games will often need all of their on-site staff to double as supporting staff. You generally need far fewer supporting staff members, those who write plots and handle what goes on between events. One supporting staff member for each two on-site staff members works well. Of course, in many games, the support staff is the same as in the on-site staff.

Personality types are an important consideration for staff. Supporting staff need to be able to plan, organize, work well together, and meet deadlines. Pre-game support is a lot of grunt-work that needs to be pounded through. On- site staff will need to be creative, open-minded, and very charismatic. You'll be dealing with angry players and entirely unexpected plot twists. And all of the staff will need to

be able to work together. This means you'll need to share similar viewpoints on how the game should work, and be friendly with each other.

Burnout

If you're running a one-shot, you're expected to provide a one time burst of creativity to write the plot, and a lesser amount of creativity during the event to deal with the unforeseen. Once a one-shot is written, you'll be able to reuse it with different players. During chronicles and on-going games, you'll be constantly expected to be creating new storylines and dealing with new problems. This introduces the risk of Staff Burnout.

When a Staff member is expected to have new plots, antagonists, and props on a routine basis, as well as keep up to date with player actions it is easy to overtax oneself and fall prey to Staff Burnout. When the staff becomes too tired to properly run the game it is obvious to the players and they become disenchanted. With no guidance, less mature players will degenerate into character killing. Games fall apart.

There are steps you can take to prevent this. First, don't run the game too often. You'll find once a month is more than stressful enough. Don't start an on-going game until you've at least tried running a chronicle. Second, take a break if you need to reorganize and relax. It's better for the game to take a month's hiatus than to fall apart. Third, increase the size of your staff so each staff members work load is reasonable. Players expect a lot of time to be put into their games, but don't seem to realize that most interactive drama staff are not paid. Players don't see that time and effort put in by staff behind the scenes.

Lastly, rotate staff members. Either rotate individuals members in and out regularly, or hand off the game to new staff occasionally. If a staff member is only responsible to script and prepare every other month, he'll be better for it. In a small, mature group you might consider having each player take turns as staff for a month.

Staff Characters

For one reason or another, you'll occasionally have staff members playing characters. Sometimes the plot will require it, sometimes the staff just wants to play. Because of the responsibilities the staff has, staff characters must be carefully controlled.

The first kind of staff character is the common non- player character (NPC). Sometimes you'll need a certain character to show up for plot reasons, and you

don't have players who can or will handle it. These characters are not key to the plot, they simply advance it. For example, a Mob boss may send his right hand man to talk to some characters about some money they owe him. This sort of character is always appropriate for staff to play and is key in smaller games.

The next kind of staff character is the bystander. A bystander is a character who takes up space and can interact with the characters, but is unimportant to the plot. Examples include bodyguards, the butler, or the maid. This position is ideal for staff members. They are nearby the action of the game, available to handle problems, while being unobtrusive and helping set the mood.

Of course, a staff member can simply be invisible to the game. They are non-characters who don't interact. They exist only to help the players (as opposed to the characters). They are marked as 'out of play' with a special hand signal, button, clothing, or other marker. This kind of staff member does become intrusive as the 'non-existent' person lurks near the action, but in necessary in situations where bystanders are inappropriate. If you are invisible to the game, stay to the edges and avoid overtly snooping on players. It makes it hard to concentrate and stay in character when an 'invisible' person is lurking over your shoulder. Remain as unobtrusive as possible.

A staff member can play 'the guilty party.' This is a very special case NPC in which the characters don't know which among them is the antagonist. Having a staff member play the guilty party is useful if the guilty party needs to be closely controlled to ensure a good event. In that sort of situation, it is important that the players believe the character to be another player, not a staff member. If the players know that a particular character is played by a staff member, they may suspect that character before gaining any evidence, ruining the surprise.

Lastly, a staff member can play a being of power: a king, prince of a city, or a mob boss. This sort of a character will be an antagonist or ally to the players. This sort of character works in smaller games which tend to be 'us against them.' In a larger game, however, strongly consider giving players these parts. In large game, players are likely to suspect that the staff members are abusing their position to take powerful characters with which to dominate the game. The two solutions are to put the power characters in the hands of the players (which generally leads to fights for power, which builds plot), or for the staff member playing the power character to avoid making decisions that influence the game. If a player playing the king orders a player's character to be executed, the executee and his friends are likely to plan an escape. If a staff member playing the king did the same thing, the players are likely to assume that the staff member is power tripping, and they are helpless to

stop the execution. Thus, a staff member in a powerful in-game position should clearly be an antagonist (and thus someone to work against), or an ally, never someone who can arbitrarily control the characters lives. I have heard abuse of powerful characters justified as "Well, that's what he would have done." As a staff member it's important to have powerful characters take actions that advance the plot and make the game more interesting, not to realistically represent an individual.

Tracking

No matter how small your game, you'll need to keep track of what's going on. In a closed room situation using a card based system with six or seven characters, a notepad and copies of all of the cards in play is probably enough. An open ended game with 40 players will require more.

All staff members should have access to any scripts and character information. The information will need to be easily accessible and easy to use.

For storing a large number of characters, I suggest a good database. *Madison By Night* uses a complex Paradox for Windows database with seventeen tables. This database makes it easy to print out character sheets, check a character, and print summaries for the staff.

The staff will need to take notes on almost everything that takes place during the game. In particular, take notes on any characters you play. If several characters take a cab to the airport and strike up a conversation with the cab driver (played by a staff member) it may be important to know how he acted, who played him, and what his reactions to the players were in case other characters chose to find him and interrogate him. Carry around pens and small notebooks.

Also take notes on the progression of the plot. If the characters all miss the key clue to a puzzle, write it down. If a player points out an inconsistency in the story, write it down. Keep track of what steps the characters take to solve any problems that confront them. Players are notorious for being blindingly stupid when you need them to come to a simple conclusion key to plot, and blindingly brilliant and leaping to the solution three hours before you were ready for them to. If you decide to run this event again, your notes will make it easy to tweak the script to improve it. If you don't run the event again, your notes will give you an idea of what worked and should be included in future plots and what didn't and should be avoided.

Props, Costumes, Scenery

You'll want props whenever possible. A piece of paper marked "Huge Gem" isn't nearly as interesting as a glass 'gem'. Props also include costumes. Being approached by a tall man in a black suit and mirror shades is much more impressive than being approached by the same man in jeans and T-shirt. Good props will help convey the mood of the game, avoid mood breaking questions like "What do you look like?" and generally make the experience more enjoyable for everyone. Staff members playing characters should wear costumes, and players should be encouraged to.

Of course, not everything can be represented by a real prop. One of *Madison By Night*'s stories included a silver flute. Clearly a real flute, silver or not, was out of our multi-dollar budget. And, it turned out, we didn't know anyone willing to loan us a flute for the climax of the story. Well, if you can't get the real thing, or even a very good imitation, do the best possible mock-up you can. The silver flute was represented by a length of dowel covered with aluminum foil. Not very realistic, but compared to the slip of paper marked "Silver Flute" that had been in play for several weeks, it was a significant improvement.

To find props, check out auctions, yard sales, and even your own storage. *Madison By Night* now has a rather evil looking carved cobra, a set of arcane looking books (23 in total), a bunch of realistic looking play money (over $2,000 'worth' in a wide mix of bills), and an occult looking medallion, a brazier, all for under fifteen dollars. One of *Madison By Night*'s players found a pinstripe suit for his gangster character at Goodwill for ten dollars. Little touches like these go a long way, and will last quite some time.

It is important to not use certain props. No real weapons (knives, guns, and the like) should *ever* be used as a prop. It's simply too dangerous. Fake weapons are acceptable provided that *everyone* who might see the 'weapon' knows that it is not real. If you're playing in public or quasi-public places, it's your responsibility to not cause any disturbances for non-participants. It's significantly easier to just use item cards than to explain what you're doing to a police officer.

Fees

Most games will require that the staff charge fees to host the game. In a small, home run game, this may be a few bucks to cover props and snacks. In a larger game this might include rental fees.

Be sure that you can legally accept and use money. Many student organizations have very specific rules governing how they can spend their income. Once you've gotten the money, keep track of how much you've gotten, from what sources, and where you're spending the money. You'll find the information useful for planning in the future, and it will come in useful should a financial problem develop.

Make sure players pay in advance, you've got better things to do than try and track down a players who skip out without paying.

Trouble-Shooting

Problem Players

Every game seems to have at least one, the player who has made it his or her job to make you regret ever considering to host a live role-playing game.

First, remember that very, very rarely does the player mean to be causing you problems. They usually have reasonable concerns. Unfortunately, a player usually doesn't have the view of the overall plan that you do. A player, like his character, is forced to make decisions based on what information he has, a problem aggravated because you often must keep the player in the dark.

Problem players will react to situations they don't like in a variety of ways. Some will approach multiple staff members and attempt to pit the staff against itself. For this reason, it is important for staff members to stay in contact. If a player is caught doing this, immediately warn them that this is unacceptable. If a player really feels that one staff members judgment was unsatisfactory, he should let all staff members he talks to know that he has already talked to another staff member.

Some problem players will cheat in a variety of ways, misremembering character statistics, using player information that the character doesn't have, misinterpreting the rules, or looking at staff notes. This is especially easy in a game where it is impossible to constantly police the players. When this happens, first consider the possibility that the 'cheating' was a matter of the player misunderstanding the rules. Explain the problem with the player and ask that they not do it again. If you are *certain* that the player knowingly violated the rules, consider how important the rules infraction was. Is it worth raising trouble over? Often cheaters only reduce their own satisfaction in the game, and the best solution is to simply watch the player for more serious infractions. If the infraction is serious enough, then punish or eject the player. Tough though it is, sometimes you will need to eject a troublesome player.

A few players may become abusive to staff members or other players. This rarely takes the form of physical abuse, but instead as verbal abuse. Depending on the severity of the abuse, either give the player a warning or eject them from the game. These games, like all games, are about having fun, and how much fun are people having when they are being verbally abused?

Rules Disputes

If you have rules, and most games do, an incident where players argue over interpretation of the rules is likely to come up, especially if one character's life is on the line. The first defense against rules dispute is to clearly state, before the game begins, that if a staff member and the written rules disagree, the staff member is correct. Secondly, point out that the staff may not be consistent. It is almost impossible for staff members to track every ruling that they have made, let alone pass this information on to other staff members. As a result, each ruling should only apply to that one situation, and may be reversed in future situations.

If a player disagrees with the ruling, they should request another opinion *from the same staff member*. The first staff member will locate and discuss the circumstances to another staff member. The second staff member will then get the players view of the situation and make a ruling. In general, the staff should support each other, even if you may disagree.

Lastly, in all cases, make sure that players are aware that staff members will make rulings that follow the spirit of the game, not the letter of the rules, even if this causes inconsistent rulings over time.

The first problem is clearly ambiguous rules. In a card based game, two characters may attempt to use cards on each other that both say, "Overrides all other cards." In a more complex game, the system may not clearly detail how a certain pairing of abilities interact. The second problem is one player attempting to achieve his goals through enforcement of the letter of the rules. In both situations, the solution is simple. Evaluate the situation. Your ruling should attempt to improve the game, make logical sense, and help everyone have fun. Never feel that you have to follow the rules. As Scott Haring, a wise referee, once told me, "Rule against weasels." Rule on the side of reality and fun, and against those weasels who try to use the rules, which are out-of-game, to improve their situation within the game.

Safety and Liability

A live role-playing game is a lot more exciting than a traditional table-top game, but with that excitement comes additional risks of injury or entanglement with the law. When assessing risks, err on the side of being overly protective.

Never use real weapons, and only use mock weapons in very closely supervised situations. Never expect a player to take risks they wouldn't normally. For example, no player should be in a real dark alley waiting for an in-game drug deal. Make sure that players know that they should not take such risks. The game should always be in either a staff member's sight or in a public place.

If you decide to use stunts or physical feats, be sure to make them as safe as possible. If you have the characters cross a tightrope, make sure the rope is low enough and the floor padded enough to minimize any damage from a fall. Make sure players are aware of any such risks and have an opportunity to back out. If you use stunts, make sure you know that the player is physically capable of it. A foam sword rigged to strike the legs of the characters in a trap could aggravate an existing knee condition of a player. (This really happened, so be warned!) A player could be allergic to theater smoke. Consider padding and safety goggles. Also consider not doing the stunt or making it safer. Could the tightrope be represented by a masking tape line on the floor?

With any live role-playing game comes liability. Make sure that you clearly spell out acceptable and unacceptable behavior in players. Let players know how you expect them to react to a real emergency, such as an injury. If possible, have players sign waiver indicating that they are familiar with the risks involved. While such waivers may not actually provide protection from a lawsuit, at least they show that the injured party was aware of the risks.

Stunts

Sooner or later, you're going to want to use a stunt to make a scene more dramatic. A vampire hunter may stake a vampire. A mob hitman may pull a derringer and shoot a rival in the gut. Properly done, these scenes can greatly add to the mood of a game. Improperly done, a stunt can ruin a game and cause injuries.

Your primary concern should be safety for everyone involved. First make sure that the participants are safe. Then make sure that viewers are safe. Finally, prepare for any possible interruptions. Take the assassination. Most definitely don't use a real gun, or even a realistic looking toy. An unrealistic toy will be more than realistic enough during the heat of the moment, and ensures that a real weapon is not

accidentally used. Make sure both participants know what is going on and have rehearsed the scene. Now consider the reactions of other players. Might a player, in the heat of the moment, incorrectly assume the gun to be real, and pull out a real concealed weapon that he was carrying? Make sure the players know that such stunts might take place. Refuse to allow players to bring real weapons into the game. What if the players try to interfere with the stunt? A player may heroically leap in front of the gun, interfering with the plot and the safety of the stunt. Make sure that players know in advance exactly what to expect, and that they should not interrupt, or make sure that they are controlled in a way that makes them unable to interfere.

Plot Fixes

Unexpected problems always crop up during a game. Players may become stumped at a critical point with only ten minutes to go, or apprehend the murderer fifteen minutes into an eight hour game. You're going to need escape valves for problems like this.

One of the simplest ways to control a game and guide players are non-player characters. When writing, add in NPCs who can aid or hinder the players as needed. A neutral party that may decide to give the characters a hand in solving a seemingly insurmountable problem. The police might harass a character too close to the answers.

When writing, also consider adding optional goals. That way players who have accomplished their primary goal will have something to do, and players who find their primary goal too hard will be able to accomplish something else.

The Police

If you're running your game in public, you are eventually going to have to deal with the police. If you handle it well, the encounter can be brief and painless. If you handle it poorly it could become a nightmare.

First, consider contacting the police in advance and explain what you're doing. This is time when phrases like 'Improvisational Drama' and similarly impressive terms may be more appropriate that 'Live Role-Playing.' True, it may be your right (But it may not, check your local laws) to play in public, and technically you don't need to explain yourself to the police, it can help avert future situations.

If you are approached by an officer of the law during the game, *stop the game immediately*. Have a *single person* talk to the officer. Having four people talking him at once and a mob behind them acting out a kidnapping makes it hard for the

officer to figure out what's going on. If just one person, preferably a staff member explains what's going on while everyone else quietly waits, the situation will be resolved much more quickly.

What Now?

Go and run an event. Find a few people interested in role-playing or acting and convince them to give it a try. Consider one of the smaller games from the Interactive Literature Foundation's Game Bank. If you're interested in a *Mind's Eye Theatre* game, look at Frank Brahman's *Fire at Midnight*. Although it can use the *Mind's Eye Theatre* rules, it contains a simplified system that doesn't require White Wolf's rules system and can be quickly taught. It doesn't require many players, about ten. It doesn't require many props, and because it is a closed room game, it doesn't require a large location (a medium sized basement is perfect). The event is one-shot, so there is no long-term commitment for players or staff. All of the characters involved are tightly written into the game, so no player should be bored. Best of all the author made the script public domain.