

Basics

I'm not wasting anyone's time explaining roleplaying games at great length. You sit down with a group of friends and describe a situation to them and ask "so, what do you do in this situation?" That's it. Add some rules so people don't argue about what they can and cannot do and you've got a roleplaying game. So let's do those rules real quick...

Characters

Each participant, or "player", has a character in the fictional world, the "setting". That character consists of a handful of abilities, which have a name and a number, like *Strength [5]*. When you use the ability, roll as many dice as the number says. So arm wrestling would be two players rolling as many dice as their characters' *Strength* says. Let's say they have *Strength [5]* and *Strength [6]*. The first player rolls 5 dice, the second rolls 6.

When a die lands on an even number (2, 4, 6, and so on), it's a good die. Odd numbers (1, 3, 5, and so on) are bad dice. Whoever rolls the most good dice wins. So if the first player above rolls 4 good dice of the 5 rolls, and the second player gets only 3 good dice out of the 6 rolled, the first player wins. Ties depend on what is going on.

If there is no real opponent, the "narrator" decides how many dice to roll against you, called the difficulty. In some cases, you just roll as many good dice as you can, not against anyone else, but rules will describe that.

The Narrator

All but one person playing are players. That last person is the narrator. A narrator plays the roll of anything and anyone around the characters, from little shopkeepers to mighty demon enemies. The narrator also knows what the story is really about and what lies ahead for the characters, depending on what they do. The narrator is *not* an opponent, but simply the one who makes the story fun and exciting for the characters and their players!

Note that in many cases, the narrator actually thinks up the story beforehand, and describes what clues and options and so on the characters will encounter, including combat. It can be a challenging job to have, but it can also be the coolest, if you're up to it!

Abilities

To get an ability you use points. A player gets 100 points to create a character, which is a simple hero. For big heroes, let players spend 150 or even 200 points.

Superheroes start on even more points. Very dark, feeble characters can start on less than 100.

Pick the abilities you want for the character. To get an ability at [1], spent 1 point. To then *raise* that to [2], spend 2 more points. Spend 3 more points to raise that to [3], and so on. So having *Strength* [5] from the start costs 1+2+3+4+5 points, or 15 points.

In easy games, the available abilities are *Strength*, *Agility*, *Intelligence*, *Health*, *Charm*, *Stealth*, *Fighting*, and *First Aid*. Depending on the setting you play in, you may add *Animals* or *Technology* to that. A basic, functional human has [5] in all the first four abilities. Any lower would be some kind of weakness.

Note that having good tools gives you extra dice. A +3 sword means you get 3 extra dice when rolling for your ability with it!

Cash

Every game world should have a cash ratio, which is how much money 1 point buys. This can only be done when a character is first created! So if the cash ratio is 100 copper, a player spending 95 points on character abilities can then spend 5 points on cash and get a total of 500 copper.

Combat

If combat is not important to your game or even just a certain situation, just roll for *Fighting* for each character and the one who rolls most good dice wins. This could be a detective tackling a suspect, or a thief getting through a couple of guards.

If combat is more important, do the same, but there is no "winning". Instead, the clash described takes a second and the loser takes as much damage as they rolled good dice fewer than the winner. So if A rolls 5 good dice and B rolls 2 good dice, B takes 3 damage. All damage is added to the damage already taken. Whenever a character takes damage, its player, or the narrator if it is not a main character, rolls for that character's *Health*, versus the total damage taken. Failure means collapsing, no longer able to fight or do much else. Failure by more than the *Health* of the character means death, unless someone helps you within a minute or so. If nobody goes down in that one second round, do another round, until someone goes down or the fighters decide to stop. Fleeing a fight means taking one more round, but the fleeing character can do no damage, so the enemy just gets one last chance to cut them down.

Two important notes: Firstly, if a character is wearing armor and is attacked by someone that is impossible to defend against, any bonus from that armor can be rolled as if it is an ability. So someone attacking from behind on a character with +2 armor still has to fight against those 2 dice. Any character can only fight with one other at a time, but armor protects against any number of attackers!

Secondly, if it is a gun fight, or other ranged weapons, anyone using a ranged weapon has a penalty, meaning they get some dice taken away before the shot. For a distance of over 1 meter or yard, it is -1, meaning 1 dice is taken away. Over 3 meters or yards, -2. Over 10, -3, over 30 -4, and so on. So yes, low skill or great distance means hitting becomes impossible. Someone firing back also has this penalty, but someone just dodging shots and jumping for cover does not. Of course, even if you manage to jump for cover, that does no damage to the opponent, either.

Relief

To get rid of damage, the injured character must be at rest and out of harm's way. Anyone, including the patient, can attempt to use *First Aid* against anyone else *once*, until someone succeeds. The roll is made with the patient's total damage as difficulty, so if the healer has *First Aid* [6] and the patient has a total of 7 damage, that's 6 dice versus 7. If the healer rolls more good dice than the injuries, the amount of damage is reduced by how many good dice were rolled more. So if the healer rolls 4 good dice and the narrator rolls only 1 good die for the injuries, total damage is reduced by 3. Yes, less injured people heal much faster, such is life, so take care out there! After 24 hours that include a good rest, everyone can try again. If damage is taken during those 24 hours, everyone can also try again, but only the new damage can be healed!

For every full 6 hours of uninterrupted sleep the patient gets, the same roll can be rolled for free, using the patient's own *Health* instead of any *First Aid*. This is the body healing itself up.

Magic

If characters can have magical abilities, allow them to take the ability *Magic*. This ability can be used instead of any other ability, even at a distance where other abilities would not (distance penalty as described earlier). So it can be used to fight someone from afar, with fireballs or invisible magic fists or whatever, or to charm them by messing with their minds (roll versus the victim's *Intelligence*).

The drawback is that every time a character uses the ability, also roll that character's *Health*. If the good dice rolled are less than the good dice rolled with *Magic*, the character takes 1 damage from a dangerous surge of magical energies through their body. Because powerful spells can kill a spell caster, the player is free to roll fewer dice with *Magic*. So a wizard in bad health with *Magic* [6] can simply say they only want to roll 4 dice when casting a spell, to reduce the risk of injury.

Cybernetics & Mutant Powers

In simple games, most other powers can be handled like just abilities with funny names or explanations. A cyborg's strength is just the usual *Strength*, an alien's

camouflage or a psychic's power to not be seen is just *Stealth* by another name. If more detail is needed, without making the game that much more advanced, use a variation of the magic system. A robot full of little gizmos can probably do lots of things, but each time it does, it runs the risk of popping a power cell or blowing a fuse!

Worlds

NARPS is designed to work with almost any kind of fictional world. That fictional world, or "setting", is mostly a question about what characters can and cannot do. Is magic available? Is technology? Can they beat up anyone like some super badasses, or are they pretty feeble compared to others? Where can they go, what can they do, who can they meet or talk to? Where can they sleep at night? How can they make money? Can they do it all freely, or do they have to follow someone else's orders? Asking such basic questions gets you far.

Time & Place

The first thing you may ask is when and where the adventures happen. The classic answer is "the middle ages, but with magic and monsters". Others are "the near or far future" or maybe some historical period, or even today.

The place is important, too, not just because different places may have different cultures, but because of how it affects something like travel. Can the characters travel freely between nations, or are they too far from any border, or just from any border they are able to pass through? How the place, and places in it, are located can make a big difference.

Threats

What do the characters need to deal with to survive, or even to thrive? This tends to also be what they need to overcome to progress, from monsters in labyrinths to corrupt officials.

Shopping

A big part of the setting, especially in simple games, is where tools can be bought, and treasures or the like sold. For combat oriented games, that means weapons with good bonuses, and likely the loot hauled from monster caves. A good list of weapons of many different qualities is not just a good thing to have, but something that can motivate the players, as their characters progress to newer and better gear!

Note that not every place needs to have the same things available for purchase. Having to get to a bigger city to get better gear is a right of passage, showing everyone that you are successful enough that the common tools no longer meet your

needs! And when you get truly powerful, you may even need to seek out secret or secluded masters to put together the next level of gear for you!

Adventures

When players have their characters go do things, it's called an adventure. Usually, the narrator has prepared at least some basic parts of the adventure beforehand, although experienced narrators get better at improvising along the way.

Plot

An adventure is usually meant to achieve something, like save a princess or defeat a villain. This is the plot. Most simple plots can be written as an order, like save the princess or defeat the villain. The complicated part is from how to get to do that. Sometimes, a main obstacle can be included in the plot line, like "save the princess from the evil cyborg queen in Singapore", but a lot of that is just a summary of what might happen during the adventure.

Scenes

Once you have a plot, you just need to throw in a bunch of scenes. Most scenes are one or maybe two locations where the characters interact with others, like locals or suspects or assassins they need to fight before they can question them. Each scene contains a number of challenges and some reward for overcoming them. This could be a dungeon room with a monster guarding some treasure, or it could be some guy's place of work where they have to make him divulge some information, somehow...

What makes a bunch of scenes an adventure is how they are connected. Like a map of rooms and hallways, scenes can connect like pearls on a string, or they can all connect to a central scene that gets visited again and again, or they may connect exactly as a map, like a grand manor house where a mystery is unfolding and there are clues in every room. Or like a dungeon. The important thing is that the players, not just their characters, know what their options are. If nothing indicates that they can go to the castle and ask the king what those strange beasts eating the villagers are, then they will not go there. The more mystery there is in an adventure, the more the narrator needs to make sure the players have an idea of the unfolding map!

Advanced

Once you feel that you can handle the basics, you have the option to make things a bit more interesting. It is an option, though, and you can stick to the simple rules and guidelines for as long as you and the others in your group wish to!

More Abilities!

The one big rule that changes everything is stacking. Stacking means adding up abilities before rolling. For example, if a character is trying to charm someone who really likes animals, the character can add what it has in *Animals* to its *Charm*. However, the main ability used is still *Charm*, because that is what is being attempted. So if *Animals* is higher, the character can only add as much as the main ability is at. For example, having *Charm* [3] and *Animals* [5] means the limit from any stacked ability is 3. The character adds 3 to their *Charm* and rolls 6 dice. Note that if multiple abilities are stacked, *all* have the same limit, but *all* still get to add that much!

Specialization

Stacking means having stackable abilities can be better than single, high abilities! It cost more to raise one ability to [7] than to simply add an ability that stacks well with it. This means specializations are often a good idea. For example, someone with *Fighting* [6] could spend 7 points on raising that ability, or simply get *Swordfight* [1] to stack with it, assuming the character uses swords. Hell, they can add several different specializations for less than the cost of raising *Fighting*! Of course, then they have to raise all those abilities. It quickly becomes a careful decision how to improve a character! Also, either the base ability or the specialization can be the main ability, so you always get the highest stack. And you can specialize even more, like also adding *Broadsword* to the stack!

The full range of specializations will depend on the world around the characters, but here are some common options:

For *Strength*, there is Lifting, Push/Pulling, Arm Wrestling, Grappling/Holding, Smashing (inanimate things like doors, tables, crates), Carrying (not just lifting up), Chopping (again, inanimate things. Or immobilized).

For *Agility*, there is Running, Jumping, Tumbling, Athletics/Sports, Gymnastics, Dancing, Parkour, Nimble (twisting your body to reach or fit in places).

For *Intelligence* there is Listen, Look, Touch, Smell/Taste, Patterns, Street Smarts, Reading People (works good with *Charm*), Common Knowledge, Academics/Sciences, Sense of Direction, Geography (the practical kind, for finding shortcuts or locating

stuff from descriptions or pictures), Survival (off the land around you), Engineering (fixing or sabotaging stuff, not common uses for machines, see Technology for that).

For *Health* there is Stamina, Endurance (tolerating pain and such), Immunity, Resistance (poisons, and alcohol), Diehard (add this after a failed roll to survive damage, might keep you from dying!), Resilience (add when rolling to not collapse from damage).

For *Charm*, any emotional manipulation goes, like Seduce, Intimidate, Calm, Impress, Confuse or the like, but it can also be the kind of charm, like Looks, Voice, Grace or such. A good debate can jump back and forth between Charm and Intelligence, with multiple specs weighing in!

For *First Aid* there is Injury, Toxins, Disease, Exhaustion, Psychological, Strain (like sports injuries or twisting something in a fight), Dental, Medical (for simple medicines, like allergies or nausea).

For *Stealth* there is Sneak, Hide, Conceal (hiding items on you or such), Camouflage (covering up bigger items in visible places), Distract, Disguise, Avoid (knowing where to go, like to avoid cameras or guards).

For *Fighting*, most specs will be types of weapons, like Bladed, Weighted (mace, club, and so on), Sticks, Chained (includes whip), Shield, or Unarmed, most of them with further specializations available, like Sword being a spec of Bladed and Warhammer being a spec of Weighted. Certain situations and conditions can also be specs, like Dueling or Mounted (either vehicle or animal, they are very different).

For *Animals* there are also for different kinds of animals, like Insects, Fish, Mammals, Reptiles and so on, as well as Tiny (rodents, spiders), Small (cats, small dogs), Medium (roughly human sized or large dog) or Large (horses and above), with Giant if the game includes dinosaurs, blue whales or similar creatures. But specs can also be tasks, like Riding, Calming, Scaring, Caretaking or the like.

For *Technology*, a lot of the animal specs work, like riding, piloting or driving a vehicle, dealing with big or small machines, and so on. The ability is not really about fixing things beyond tricks and proper maintenance, anything really serious is Engineering, listed under Intelligence, although in some cases being a clever user helps. The narrator decides that on the spot.

Talents

Some abilities seem made entirely for stacking. These are talents. They work exactly like any other ability, they are simply broad ideas, some innate knack the character has. On one end, that could be abilities like *Precision*, *Reflexes*, *Dexterity* (manual dexterity, meaning nimble fingers, not an agile body) or *Willpower*. These can be used in hitting things from afar or steadily assembling tiny mechanical gadgets, dodging bullets or steering fast vehicles, pickpocketing or, again, steadily assembling tiny mechanical gadgets, or not wetting yourself when faced with your

first werewolf. They will usually do this stacked with another ability, though.

Other talents are more direct, like familiarity with a terrain. Someone with *Forest* might fight, hide, survive, or do other things better when in an actual forest, and other types of places may be similar talents, like swamps, jungles, mountains, even suburbia or urban sprawls. Taken to the extreme, dozens of talents may describe attunement to something, like magic wands made of different kinds of woods and metal ornamentation and more things, or futuristic weapons with different triggers, muzzle design, magazine fittings and so on. Having just [1] or [2] in dozens of such things can make gear or places or even people or situations insanely intricate, if the world around them is designed with those details in mind!

Backgrounds

Coming from, or having had a lot of experience with, people from a certain background can almost seem like a talent in its own right! Someone with a *Criminal* [4] background would be good at dealing with criminals, but would also know how they think, making it easier to spot their marks on a case or figure out where to find them in a city. The line between talent and background can easily blur, of course. Do you understand orcs because you lived near them as a child or because something about them just makes sense to you? Whether you can have something both as a talent and somehow connected to a background is up to the narrator, and up to how well you tell your character's story behind it!

Status

This is kind of the reversed version of a background. It's not about what or even who you know, it's about who knows you, or at least who thinks they do. A status can be broad, like being an aristocrat or a war veteran, or it can be very personal, like being known for a specific act of bravery or even being a celebrity. People react to you better. Of course, this assumes you maintain the aura of that status. Nobody treats you like a rich person if all they see is you in poverty.

While status may be stacked whenever dealing with someone who recognizes it, there are some times when it is a flat number. A status within a secret organization could be a security clearance, and when dealing with the average person in that organization, it just stacks with abilities meant to impress that person. But if you need a certain file, it only matters if you have *Security Clearance* [3] or more. Your dazzling charms will not change that. The same can be said for things like rank.

Disabilities

These flip the idea of abilities on its head. A disability is not about what you can do to the world, but what the world can do to you. Each disability has a trigger and reaction. Triggers can be anything found in the setting, from foreigners to spiders to

food, but they need to be common enough that the character is likely to run into them. The reaction is how the character will respond to it, like fear, cravings, anger, or the like. It is added just like an ability, but you get the points instead of paying them, so disabilities can let you add more abilities!

Whenever the trigger is encountered, roll the number of dice listed for the disability. The amount of good dice describe how bad the reaction is. 1 good die might mean visible discomfort, while 5 bad dice will mean something like attacking the trigger, wanting to have it, or other reckless actions. Higher numbers of good dice may well mean putting the character's life in danger somehow, like running into traffic or revealing where you are by throwing yourself at a feast of cake! There will always be a penalty on rolls for any conscious action, equal to the amount of good dice rolled. If you really hate the person talking, it will be hard for you to concentrate on hiding the jewel you stole from her!

To avoid players overreaching, the amount of points from disabilities can be capped, for example at 1/4 of the starting points. So a character made with 100 points can only have 25 points worth of disabilities, for example.

Worlds

The threats, time and place, and shopping are all still important for a setting, but other things can create a lot of depth. A lot of it has to do with how the world works, even beyond any adventures, but it still ends up playing into the adventures in surprising ways!

Powers

Every world has one or more things that are at the center of power, the stuff almost everyone will fight for. Money is an easy answer, and so is authority, actual power over others. But with a bit of detail, power can become far more complex. Maybe the world works on blackmail, or honor and all the rituals that go with it. Maybe religious figures bless certain people, in word or magic, and those people are seen as better than others. Maybe hacking the global networks is how you get control over others. Power can be many things. Some of it will, of course, mainly be valuable because it makes getting other power easier or safer. Maybe money is only seen as powerful because it lets the rich build monuments to the aliens, which is where the real power lies!

Do note that power can, but does not have to, mean actual powers, like superpowers or the like. If powerful abilities exist, these will likely be considered power, but they need not be. They may be too weak to really have an impact, or they may have drawbacks that keep their users in check, or even ruins them.

Economy

It might seem like a dull topic, but the overall economy of a world can create very interesting situations. Most of that is because it is about what you can get where. Can you get powerful weapons in any towns near the dragon, or must you make do with what you have or can find? Can you replenish your healing potions, ammo, fuel, power cells, or other things you need? Can you hire a guide, or a mercenary? And if you can, is it cheap or expensive? What is the quality like? You could end up damaging the gear you even have by using low quality tools. And the more detailed the gear is, the more it matters. Maybe the cheap weapons are popular and there is ammo and parts for them everywhere, but the fancy stuff the characters have finally been able to afford is too expensive for locals and impossible to get anything for!

Connected to that is the law. Some things will be legal, some will be illegal, some may require a license, or royal decree, or proof of alien bloodline, or a fee. Some things are expensive if bought legally, but not on the black market, although that means no proof that you own it. And of course, some things are only available, or just cheaper or better, when acquired through certain contacts. And the price may not be just a matter of money...

Factions

Sometimes, characters fight for, with, or because of people in their world. This might be serial killers or powerful wizards, innocent villagers or vulnerable princesses, or any of the like. But other times, they're dealing with larger groups, where handling one person just doesn't do it. Such large groups, or factions, can change the game completely. Suddenly, outrunning or defeating some impressive foe is not enough, because they're part of something bigger, and one of their buddies is waiting just around the next corner. Suddenly, the enemy, friend, or useful local has a branch office in most towns or cities, rather than just belonging in one place.

Other than being a bigger network of people, from the loose community around an old mining town to the rigid guild or corporation, factions may also streamline part of, or all of, a society. Maybe everyone uses the same kind of tech or magic. Maybe everyone has roughly the same attitude towards an important topic. Maybe everyone has similar routines or reactions to things. And maybe the ones who don't stick out. Maybe they are dealt with. And if two or more factions have similar effects on the same group of people, there could be conflicts, ranging from entrenched refusal to cooperate to all out war! And on a greater scale, cultures or races may be their own super-faction, with smaller factions within, just like other factions can have smaller factions inside, competing or cooperating.

Finally, some factions are secret, or not even that clearly defined, but still have an effect on their surroundings. A network of gossip would spread information in ways that seem to come out of nowhere, while entirely unconnected fans of a trend could be doing that trend all around a city, creating patterns of public behavior not even

they are aware of! Whether they insist on staying secret is to be seen...

Wilderness

From climates and landscapes to creatures and exotic plantlife, the kinds of unplanned, unstructured wilderness that exists in a setting can play a huge role. Even if the adventures are entirely urban, the uncontrolled sprawl of a rundown or poorly managed part of the city can be infested with things that were never designed to be there. Creatures that lurk in the dark or stalk the characters for food, animals that show what powers are near, thick mats of fungi and plants covering the places that humans or others leave behind, they all have functions in adventures, from enemies to clues to sources of strength.

For a kind of nature to really make an impact, it should be designed as an ecology, with multiple things in it that sustain one another. Maybe the undead city has species of carrion birds that, although still alive, will shriek at living people entering, alerting the dead that someone is there, while part living, part dead plants grow over and consume the bones of whatever victims the ghouls could hunt down last night. Having things feed on each other and serve a role in a broader ecology can make a place truly immersive.

Locations

It might seem painfully obvious, but things happen in places. Those places may be very unique, or they can be fairly standard types of places. A lab, for example, or a town square, or a shop of some kind. Knowing the kinds of locations that scenes can be set in helps build better adventures faster. What is in the location, what condition the location is in, who can affect things there, either directly or from a far, all those are important things. But so is where the location is, and what is around it, if nothing else then to describe how easy or difficult the location is to get to.

A big part of locations is whether things there are put there intentionally or just somehow came to be there. Items like weapons and tools are made to serve a purpose, and a location may be that, too, but it could also be overgrown by plants, falling apart due to time or damage, partially flooded, or just be used by homeless animals or even people. And to flip things over, the location could have an effect on other things, including other locations nearby, or even not nearby! A tunnel could connect places that would not otherwise seem connected, an overgrown ruin could be spreading plants to overgrow places around it, and so on. While rarely the true focus of a scene, a location can set the scene quite effectively.

Events

Things happen. But what are those things? On a basic level, it might be people interacting with people, like fighting, talking, manipulating, and so on. But there are

bigger things that can happen, and they can define a big part of the world. Volcanoes, floods, plagues, swarms of insects, the discovery of gold or other valuables, even the loss of an entire city or civilization. And people have their events, too, from celebrations to lynchings to riots. The size of an event and what it benefits or hurts are often the main questions, but events can be stranger than that. Maybe a sudden fog causes all metal to rust into dust. Or maybe it gives people powers and heals wounds. Or gives them superpowers.

The function of an event can depend on when it occurs. Sudden and unexplained events may create circumstances for the characters to deal with, or it may signal a need to solve the mystery of why it happened. Regular events may be something to plan for, or plan around, either to avoid or use them, or for some side-effect they have. And events that occur again and again may warn of things, like stampedes of animals from the forest warning that the ancient trolls are waking up again somewhere deep inside! Something makes events happen, and then events make something else happen.

Adventures

Plot and scenes are the bedrock of adventures, even advanced ones. But they can be used in more complicated ways allowing for adventures that challenge the players to figure out, or keep track of, what they've gotten their characters involved in! For longer campaigns, this can set up future events, or explain past ones, effectively telling one story across multiple adventures.

Sides

Good versus Evil can be fun, but at some point, it might get too trivial. That is when you start thinking in sides. In a basic adventure, there is the side that the players' characters are on, and there is the side that is trying to defeat them. This can be made much more complicated. A side can be added that is against both of them, making it a three-way battle, perhaps three different teams wanting to get the treasure first. Other sides may want something different, which simply interferes with the plot, like wanting the treasure to stay buried because it is said to be cursed. Another side may strongly object to the treasure being dug up because it would destroy an important area, and so on. Sides can be added for a number of things, to the point that a flowchart is the best way to keep track of it. People, including the characters, may even change sides, like abandoning the treasure hunt in order to protect that area from the others!

Adding sides to an adventure is easy, especially if the world has interesting factions and people that could get in the characters' way. Making it matter in the adventure is a little more difficult. Certain sides will have certain methods, and will only enter the adventure at points where these methods make sense. For example, the side

protecting the area the treasure is buried in might be less financed and very local to the area, so they will not be very visible until the characters get there. They may have a few allies try to sabotage the characters on the way, but their real efforts only show when the characters get close to the treasure. That does not mean they should be completely unknown until then, and dropping hints that someone might try to protect the area can be a good idea, or they will seem to just show up out of nothing. Having sides be a known, or at least suspected, problem for a longer time can make it less a squabble of bland sides, and more a tense dance of avoiding one side here and one side there!

Stages

Scenes are nice and nifty, but sometimes, an adventure is divided into large chunks of them. These chunks are stages, and while they can be in a row, one stage fitting logically after another, they need not be. Stages can be fitted together just as creatively as scenes, from in nice rows to hubs with access to many scenes to just pure chaos! What is interesting about stages is that you never really know what scenes connect them. Maybe going to the old house requires you to talk to the old creepy villager, or maybe you can just sail across the lake, or maybe pay the professor's young assistant to drive you there, even though he knows he shouldn't. The villager, lake and assistant are all part of what happens in town, however many scenes take place there. Once you get to the old house, a completely new set of scenes can unfold. What using stages means is that you need to get from one chunk of scenes to another for them to happen, instead of just going back and forth between rooms in the house and people in town. When you're in a certain stage, you tend to stay there. Depending on the adventure, you may revisit a stage, but it is always a case of leaving the stuff you are doing behind, and going to do some completely different stuff elsewhere.

Once stages are used, they can be turned up easily, adding flair and challenges. Maybe the old house is dark, without electricity and with few oil lamps that will even work at this point, while the town is nicely lit. Maybe the town is full of people who protest at every turn over the foreigners that are snooping around, like the player characters, while the house is empty and, in its own creepy way, peaceful. Maybe there are wild and dangerous animals around the house, maybe even inside if they can find a way in and smell fresh meat, while the town is safe from such worries. These circumstances or paradigms can be subtle, like one stage being more tense than the last, or extreme, like one stage being peaceful socializing and mentally challenging mystery, while the other is hard action. And note that a different stage need not always mean a new place! Once the cybernetic death gangs show up, the peaceful chats at the corporate headquarters is over, and another stage begins!

Finally, stages can be used to turn things on their head, either before or after the shift between stages. As mentioned, a peaceful investigation can become violent action, meaning all the evidence now becomes more useful as cover. But a stage can

also switch between knowing and not knowing what is going on. The characters may realize that the crime they are investigating goes far deeper than expected, meaning suddenly friends and foes are not what they were before. Or the mess of factions fighting each other for unknown reasons might suddenly make sense when the truth behind the man they all are hunting comes out!

Icons

Recurring characters and locations are not that advanced. Even the most basic adventures can have a place that the characters return to, maybe a tavern to recover in or a lab that helps them with their high tech gear. And having people return, like villains trying another devious plan or the fairie queen coming to those who helped before to ask for help again, is fairly normal. Icons take this farther. An icon may or may not even be directly involved in the adventure, but will still loom over it. A faction, like a powerful guild or a megacorporation, that seems very interested in what is going on but refuses to take sides or get involved. The aging hero that clearly knows more about the threat to the kingdom but is too burned out to pass on the knowledge. The one piece of experimental equipment that can no longer be found anywhere, but understanding how it worked is essential to understanding the adventure. These things stand out without having to be a huge part of the plot. A scene might take place in an iconic location, like a duel in the halls of the fallen king, halls that many have talked about and that legends say will cause an iconic ancient sword to show its true power.

Making something iconic in this way is not about making it more powerful than anything else. Instead, it is about having it very slightly affect many things throughout the adventure, like having people react when hearing of it or finding clues about its true nature. Many such encounters can be completely innocent, like someone remarking that they know the guy the characters are looking for, and they feel sorry for what happened to him. Maybe the characters, and players, already know what happened to him, maybe they find out this way, but the encounter itself is nothing spectacular. But if people all over the place know this person, or even if only a special set of people know of him, he slowly becomes iconic, and the adventure can build on that, making his existence a source of tension, or of clues, or maybe even a topic that can change how people act. If some cocky gang members get in the characters' way, maybe casually letting them know that the characters are looking for Old Harry because they have information about the theft of the Reduction Matrix, the gang members will get nervous, knowing how important that is to Old Harry, and what might happen if they stop the information from reaching him. Or maybe they'll want to bring the information to him themselves, with or without the characters...