

From the Mind's Eye to the Tabletop

by Adrian BK

Whether mechanical or conceptual, I'll shamelessly take ideas from any system and port them across to my current game (whatever that might be). Whilst planning a new World of Darkness game, I had a chance to reflect on some ideas from the Camarilla LARP organisation that influence my storyteller style. I was part of the Camarilla from 1997-2003 and ran LARPs for *Masquerade*, *Dark Ages*, *Apocalypse*, *Oblivion* and *Dreaming*. These games were some of the best I've ever played, due mainly to the player engagement and enthusiasm.

The following is a summary of the ideas that I now try to incorporate in my own tabletop games, as my days of LARPing are long behind me. Some are simply common-sense, others to help with storyteller burn-out, and the rest is simply advice.

Social Combat

The potential bane of any chronicle is the player who maximises their Social dice pools and simply wants to roll their way out of any social encounter. This is the antithesis of my storytelling style, but an alternative was offered by a fellow storyteller in another Domain.

When it is appropriate for characters to make opposed social rolls (or in LARP, a social challenge) have the outcome determined with the appropriate mechanic. The players then role-play the scene with the outcome in mind. I've seen this used successfully in many situations, and I can recall one scene in which the victor of the challenge wanted to relent (and change his result) after roleplaying the debate. If the players can agree on the outcome and a basic idea of

how the scene will play out, it becomes interesting spectacle for the other players. If the scene is played out well, then extra experience points should be offered; it rewards good play and sets a standard for the table (or venue).

Obviously this approach isn't going to work in every social challenge; Storyteller common-sense needs to be in play. The main rule I use is that the integrity of player agency should not be compromised.

Sharing the load

My first Storyteller post in the Camarilla lasted about two years and by that stage, I was burnt out. The reason is very simple: I was running a game for thirty people every fortnight - alone (which was plain stupid). When I returned for a second post as *Masquerade* Storyteller, I



set up a Storyteller Team. These were the people who came to my house at least once a month, ate pizza, watched movies, and helped write plot. On game nights, they were responsible for various scenes and I trusted them to make decisions about the game. They were also on hand to portray NPCs. As a result, I had a lot of fun, and more importantly so did the players.

Wrath: the Oblivion (and to an extent *Kindred of the East*) in tabletop format actively encourages players to take on extra roles in the game; namely that of the Shadowguide. The main message with this point is to ensure that you connect with other people; use online forums, communities and the like to build ideas and don't go it alone.

If a player wants to rest a character for a session or two, let them take on an NPC. This is a good way to let a player experiment (within certain guidelines) with a new concept, or a character type that is new. In some LARP venues, I'd have a pool of players without permanent characters (or in-between characters) who would act as my NPC cast. They had fun playing the 'bit parts', I was relieved of some workload, and everyone won.

Influence

The Camarilla loves paperwork. In all fairness, all organised play requires a level of bureaucracy, and Influence added a great layer to the game. Basically, each player submits (by a deadline) their activities for the month. The Storyteller then takes all the actions and writes an individual response, but considers how actions interact across the entire story.

In a Camarilla game, Influence is a Background and numerically expresses the level of influence a character has over aspects of mortal society (normally rated

Influence Rules

Whilst *The Gilded Cage* is an excellent sourcebook for introducing Influence into your tabletop game; here's the system I use at my table:

Work out the level of the attempted action using *Laws of the Night*. Then roll a number of dice equal to the character's Influence in that sphere.. The Difficulty is four plus the rating of the attempted action. Failure to generate a success means that the influence is depleted for a number of days equal to the rating of the action attempted. Starting characters are restricted to an influence level of three, with no more dots in Influence than your Generation Background + 3.

Once the roll is made, it is up to the Storyteller and player to work out a suitable manner for the story to resolve. Influence isn't a magical answer for every problem, and there should be a level of internal consistency as to how it is used in the chronicle.

Example: Tony Toreador want to crush the career of a rival's ghoul. His player consults 'Laws of the Night' and finds that this is a level 3 action in the *High Society* sphere (luckily Tony has *Influence: High Society* at 3). After making a few phone calls, and asking a contact to construct a fake social media presence for the young ghoul, Tony's player rolls three dice against a difficulty of 7 (level of action plus four) and announces the roll (a 7, 8, and 10). The acting career of the young starlet to be will not last long...

out of five). These can include *Bureaucracy, Medical, Underworld, Occult, Finance*, and a host of others. Each sphere of Influence lists the types of activities available to each character from level one to five.



The advantage to this system is that characters can pursue goals outside of the main story - and many players find this just as fulfilling as attending the actual play sessions. Similar to blue-booking it's possible for a host of subplots to be nurtured in downtime.

A key area in *Masquerade* is the exploration of humanity. The player of a Brujah added in his monthly Influence a throwaway line about exploring his neighbourhood for possible threats. I wrote that he found his neighbour, an elderly man (who was later termed old man Henderson) out in his shed late at night enjoying wood turning. Eventually the Brujah met old man Henderson and the two struck up a friendship. Each month a little more of Henderson's personality and back story came out; and this Brujah thug came to look at Henderson as a friend. The vampire sympathised with the mortal, and we explored (through downtime) what that meant to his outlook. The player began to look forward to his interactions with Henderson as much as his scenes with the rest of his ghouled biker gang. As it was clear that Henderson was of poor health, discussion even started about

whether the vampire wanted to ghoule him - or simply leave him and be prepared for the inevitable parting.

There are lots of other examples, but you get the idea. This is also a gauge to see what is important to players in your game. If you allow Influence at your table and everyone picks *Underworld* (which covers organised crime), this tells you a lot about the type of story they want. Likewise, blue-booking and downtime actions allow you to introduce plot elements for players to try. If the player responds positively, you might consider bringing this element into the '*mainstream*' plot.

Player challenges

This actually started as a joke, but became a standing part of my Storyteller role. One night I was running late to the LARP and grabbed a pizza on the way, consuming it whilst running through the LARP set-up. One player approached me and joked that I'd bought the pizza because I needed it as a prop. When I responded that this wasn't the case, he bet me (a can of soft drink) that I

couldn't work it into the plot for the evening. Challenge accepted!

After that night, I'd have a player every now and again bring me something as a challenge to add to the game. The rules were simple; it had to be a meaningful part of the plot (so I was cheating if it was simply window dressing). This good-natured challenge to my storytelling abilities garnered goodwill from the players, made me think creatively, and kept people engaged with the evening.

For your tabletop game, you might ask players to do something similar. Alternatively, have players bring along something to the game, and then use the item in relation to an NPC. Remember my point about 'sharing the load' above? This is a neat way of lightly distributing some of the NPC creation process, and your players will get a kick out of seeing their items used in game.

Recharge and refocus

Most of the early LARPs I attended started in the early evening and then simply ran on for a few hours. Maintaining character for this long was difficult for a lot of players, the smokers all congregated outside (which caused lots of problems for those wanting to interact with their characters), and focus was easily lost by the end of the night.

Classic World of Darkness modules were broken into Acts and Scenes, so I broke LARPs (and my tabletop games) down in a similar fashion. At the beginning of the night, I'd announce that the LARP was in two Acts, and roughly (very roughly) when I expected Act One to finish. We'd schedule a half hour break, have soft drink and chocolate on hand and encourage people to take a break at this time.

When we gathered back, I'd introduce the new Act and set the scene, but also have a couple of refocusing questions. The

ground rules were simple: I'd call on people at random to answer questions

Chinese Character Portrait

Nephilim (published by Chaosium) provided a set of questions, termed the Chinese Character Portrait, as a way of further exploring character. I've found that most of the questions force players to think in very different ways to standard character descriptions. The questions are:

If I were a natural phenomenon, I would be...

If I were a metal, I would be...

If I were an animal, I would be...

If I were a color, I would be...

If I were a mythological being, I would be...

If I were a famous human being, I would be...

If I were a human activity, I would be...

If I were a work of art, I would be...

If I were a weapon, I would be...

If I were an object, I would be...

that I'd taken from the *Nephilim RPG* (see sidebar above). They were free to refuse, and no-one should feel obligated to answer. However, I never encountered a refusal. I'd ask five or six people the questions, get everyone thinking about their character and then plunge into Act Two.

Another exercise was important when we had a mortal Mayoral election running in the background of the story. As our refocusing activity, I went around to players randomly, and asked them to act as though they were being interviewed as a '*man on the street*' for the local news. I fired off some questions about the election and everyone watched as hilarity ensued.

The main point is to have a defined break and something that clearly indicates

when everyone should get their game face on.

Conclusion

So there you have it - five ideas from LARP that easily translate to the tabletop. As I said from the outset, some are simple common-sense, but all have been used at my table.

I only ran Camarilla games with the classic World of Darkness, and the same applies to my tabletop games. However, I'm sure that everything discussed above would easily translate into new WoD (or even other game systems). If you get the chance, I'd recommend attending a LARP at least once; the simple change of scale gets you thinking about roleplaying in a very different light. If you do trial any of these ideas, let me know how they work out - perhaps you can even add to this list.

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