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## Campaign Proposals

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The following is an email I sent to my Friday group. It was inspired by Brian's zine in #388.

### Overview

The following proposals are for a short (five or six session) campaigns (or arcs). If things click and everyone is having fun, more sessions could be developed. The goal of the short campaign is to explore more of the characters, elements, and themes than we get from a one- or two-session game. If the one-shot is a TV movie or pilot, the short campaign is the mini-series that may or may not lead to a full series/season. Should the campaign be "picked up," there will probably be a second (or more) mini-series rather than a long, continuous campaign and there definitely will be room for players to add their mark to the setting and plots.

In each of the proposals, we will make characters collectively (with an eye toward group cohesion and cooperation) and there will be no need or obligation for you to purchase the game rules.

What I need from everyone is for each of you to assign a score to each of the proposals using the following rating system:

0 = I will skip the nights you run this.

1 = I would rather not play this.

2 = I would like to play this.

3 = I will rearrange my schedule to play this.

You may respond in public or private and with or without additional comments and/or opinions. Clarifying questions and suggestions are also welcome. The proposal that gets the best\* accumulated score will be the one I put together and run. The chosen campaign would start in March or April, depending on scheduling and other people running games. The sessions would be bi-weekly.

\*The best score will be a qualitative assessment with an eye towards having a consistent core of enthusiastic players (including myself) rather than trying to accommodate or please everyone.

### The Proposals

#### A) Voyages of the Star League

In a future that never was, a valiant star ship crew embark on a journey of discovery and adventure, to explore strange new worlds, meet new life and new civilizations, etc. This is a retro-sf

campaign in the vein of *Forbidden Planet* and classic *Star Trek* with the PCs as the bridge crew. Think of the first adventure (for those of you who were there) as the unaired pilot. We will pick up with a new ship, a new crew, and new adventures (then they'll cut up the pilot and feature it in a flashback courtroom episode).

System: *Savage Worlds*, with some changes to make it feel more like a classic serial adventure show shown in glorious black-and-white, borrowing drama/fate point ideas from *Buffy* and *Spirit of the Century*.

#### B) Legacy of the Magi

Modern teenagers from Earth are transported to a magical world (actually, a network of worlds connected by mystical gates) and now must uncover an ancient, lost secret and find a way home. Our heroes become empowered in this new world and can unlock powers they never had on Earth. This is an action-adventure fantasy game of personal discovery, exploration, and violent clashes with evil forces who want to control the secret for themselves. The tone will emulate a Saturday morning cartoon like the classic *Dungeons & Dragons* or a Nickelodeon show like *Avatar: The Last Airbender*.

System: True20, a streamlined and generic version of the d20 system that removes most of the fiddly complexity of D&D (especially in combat).

#### C) The Night Things

Generations ago, at the height of a horrific war, the Night Things came and humans have been on the run, in hiding, and in decline ever since. Ordinary people fight for survival alongside the Touched (those changed by the eldritch energies brought by the Night Things), and the Witches (those with the talent to control those energies). The technology of the old world is all but lost and weapons are few against the Abominations (hybrid offspring of the Night Things), the Night Things themselves, and the human forces serving them (voluntarily or not). This is post-apocalyptic fantasy horror.

System: *Savage Worlds* "straight up," maintaining the harsh realities of the dice to reflect the darker reality of the world while still keeping the larger-than-life nature of the Wild Cards (PCs).

#### D) World Askew

Sometime this morning, the world changed. Or maybe you did. Either reality or your percep-

tion of it has changed in ways both frightening and fascinating. As you struggle to maintain your grip on your sanity and your life, you find you are not alone in this strange, new world. This is a game of modern weirdness and mystery which will shake the PCs' knowledge of the world and themselves. It is definitely a "high trust" game and even the underlying genre and influences will be kept a secret and revealed in the game to enhance the discovery process.

System: Fudge, practically freeform.

[Because some players commented that the description was too vague, I wrote the following:

Allow me to help clarify what this game would be about. It falls into the genre of "modern weird shit" games like *Over the Edge*, *Unknown Armies*, *Kult*, *Dread* (either version), *Don't Rest Your Head*, *World of Darkness* (with mortals), and many others. For genre, think *Dark City*, *Neverwhere*, *The Lost Room* (poke, Merwin<sup>1</sup>), or anything by Philip K. Dick or published by Vertigo. I can't go into any more details because a) I want them to be a surprise, and b) I haven't figured it out myself, yet.

The first arc will introduce the PCs and expose them to the new world before them. The plot will center around them figuring out what the hell is going on. Future arcs would explore more of the world with the PCs no longer "normal, everyday people" but (at least partially) clued in to what's going on.]

### E) Global Guardians

In a world with a long history of superheroes fighting for justice and protecting ordinary citizens against villainous forces, a world-spanning foe brings the guardians of various cities across the world together for the common good. The first episodes will describe how the heroes come together and pool their resources and talents for the greatest good. Later episodes (if the campaign continues) will be a typical superhero series not unlike the Avengers or Justice League. The personal stories of the heroes will also be told in between the fights against supervillains, super-terrorist organizations, and other global threats.

System: Either *Mutants & Masterminds* (for a crunchy feel) or *Fudge* (with influences from *SotC*)

1 Merwin had proposed a mini-campaign based on the Sci-Fi Chanel mini-series *The Lost Room* shortly after that series aired in late 2006. Though we went through character creation (using CORPS), we never actually played. He often gets concepts that sound good in his head but he lacks follow-through and stumbles in the execution.

and *Truth & Justice* for a looser feel), to be decided by the players; you may submit two different votes, one for each system.

### F) Dungeons and the Dragons Who Live There

Wanted: Adventurers and heroes to recover a missing artifact, slay a dragon, protect the town from an evil horde, and/or save a princess. Pays well. Inquire with the mysterious stranger in the tavern.

This is an "old school" game of hack-and-slash and puzzle/mystery-solving with some role-playing in between. Killing things, taking their stuff, and finding fame, fortune, and magical items is the order of the day. Character development will focus on leveling up, getting better gear, and fighting bigger, badder monsters. This campaign will not be deep (except for the dungeons, of course).

System: To be determined, but something free that invokes classic blue-box D&D, such as *Labyrinth Lord* or *Basic Fantasy*. Little or none of the modern frpg complexity will exist and combat tactics will not get much deeper than determining marching order and choosing which spells to cast.

### Vote Results

And here is how the group voted:

	A <sup>2</sup>	B	C	D	E	F
<b>Gil</b>	3	2	1	1	3	0
<b>Ian</b>	2	1	2	3	3	1
<b>Merwin<sup>3</sup></b>	2(1)	1(2)	1(1)	2(3)	2(2)	2(3)
<b>Robert</b>	2	2	1	2	1	2
<b>Steven</b>	1	1	2	3	2	0
<b>Tom</b>	1	2	1	3	2	1
<b>Zack</b>	1	3	2	1	2	2

As I write this, I haven't decided what I am going to run, but the clear choice is between D (most 3s) and E (fewest 1s). Much of the interest in E seems to be that many of them have never played in a superhero campaign. If I do run it, I'll probably go the *Fudge/T&J* route to keep things loose and not let them get bogged down in rules and character creation. I'll make my final decision after *Dun-DraCon*.

2 Gil played the Captain and Zack the Chief Engineer in the first *Voyages* game.

3 He gave two votes for each game: actual (leaning towards). As Robert said, "Leave it to Merwin to actually complicate a simple rating system. :)"

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## X-Ω

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I have to maintain my momentum writing about this if I ever hope to complete it. For those who might wonder X-Ω wasn't listed as a system in my Campaign Proposals, it's because I'm a chickenshit.<sup>4</sup> Whether I run D or E (see above), X-Ω elements will find their way into the game.

### Setting the Difficulty

As mentioned previously, setting the difficulty of a task is usually just a matter of determining the ability level required for marginal success. Usually, the determination is made by the GM, since the GM can factor in elements that may not be evident to the players. On the other hand, players will have their own opinions and should be encouraged to suggest what the difficulty should be. In some cases, the player may actually believe the task is harder than the GM thinks it is. Everyone should feel open to come to a consensus on the appropriate value without distracting the game into a lengthy tangential discussion. Ultimately, the decision is up to the GM, but the players are free of course to use karma tokens.

In the case of an opposed task, the difficulty is the ability rank of the other character, PC or GMC. This can be adjusted up or down on either or both sides depending on the circumstances.

In the course of the game, it is probably not worth the effort of the GM to formally establish the difficulty; rather, the GM can simply declare the result.

*Player: "I pick up a rock and throw it at the security camera, trying to bust it."*

*GM: "What's your athletics?"*

*Player: "Great."*

*GM: "No problem. You hit the thing squarely, busting off the lens portion. Shattered glass and plastic falls to the ground."*

This avoids any unnecessary discussion about the difficulty and gets to the action as quickly as possible (even more quickly if the GM has a crib sheet of the PCs' ability ranks). However, it can cause problems if the result is not to the player's liking and the game stops for a bit while they go back through explaining the difficulties involved. After discussing, they may even agree to change the result.

If the GM has any doubt about the appropriate difficulty, knows that it will be close to the PC's

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<sup>4</sup> The Urban Dictionary definition #2 of chickenshit is interesting; I did not know that.

rank, or knows it may be a point of contention with the players in a dramatic part of the story, it is usually a good idea to set the difficulty first. But as the game progresses and GMs and players get a feel for the difficulty scale, this gradually becomes unnecessary. But even with experienced players, it never hurts to double-check and avoid problems ahead of time.

### A Matter of Ability

The most important factor in determining if a task is within a character's ability is how much skill is actually required to have any thought of success. There are some tasks that are so complex, sophisticated, or specialized that someone of lesser ability should have no chance at succeeding. If a problem is simply too hard or the hurdle too high, no beneficial factors will help. Your best bet is to cheat. A good (rank 2) athlete cannot run a four-minute mile, even downhill with a tailwind, but having in-line skates may do the trick. Not even a great (rank 3) nurse cannot expect to perform brain surgery unless a qualified brain surgeon was right there, dictating the entire procedure.

### Impossible Tasks

Some tasks are simply impossible for anyone of any ability rank. The GM and players can reasonably agree when something is truly impossible as opposed to simply really hard. An impossible task need not have a difficulty level for not even an Ω-ranked ability will succeed. But if the task is possible, then it will have a difficulty from 1 to Ω, average to legendary, and players can spend karma tokens to succeed if the PCs' ranks are not up to the task.

### A Matter of Genre

The characters in action movies, pulp novels, and comics perform stunts that would be impossible in the real world. This is not because they have high ranks of ability (though they often do), but because the difficulty scale is much more generous in these genres. The players and GM must adjust their perception of what is possible and reasonable based on the type of story they are telling. The very same task, like jumping from rooftop to rooftop may have a difficulty of 4 in a realistic or gritty the campaign, but only a 1 or 2 in a Hong Kong style martial arts game.

### A Matter of Time

The players and GM should agree on how long a task should take, assuming the character is skilled enough to do it. The time is so dependent

upon the circumstances, that no guidelines can be sufficient except that you should use your best judgment. For example, you might collectively decide that repairing the transmission on a car takes four hours or that cracking the safe takes thirty minutes.

If there simply is not enough time, the task may be impossible. In these cases, the players will need to redefine what exactly the goal is. For example, there may not be enough time to perform surgery to stop internal bleeding, but there is enough time to apply pressure, connect an IV, and get the patient someplace safer.

In hurried situations, the question often is not "Can I do it?" but "Can I do it in time?" A rushed job (and increased difficulty) may turn what would have been a moderate success into a marginal one. Having more expertise (higher rank) may reduce the time required, but there is a limit. An expert pastry chef might be able to prepare a batter quickly, but the cake still needs a minimum time to bake; likewise, a top-notch programmer can only write so many lines of code a minute. With that caveat, a handy guideline is to halve the time required for each rank by which the character exceeds the difficulty. If a rank 3 engineer can bring the warp drives online in eight hours, a rank 5 engineer could do it in two.

This principle can also be applied to other results. A major failure could mean hours of fruitless labor, taking far longer than a moderate failure. A marginal success might have achieved the goals, but taken longer than a moderate success.

Taking extra time does not necessarily make the task easier (decreasing the difficulty), but having less experience (lower rank) may increase the time needed. Taking all the time in the world will not help if you do not know what you are doing. Sometimes spending more time (with decreased difficulty) can result in a major success instead of a moderate success (by being having the luxury to double-check work, put on finishing touches, or even experiment with different approaches).

### **Tools for the Job**

Without the right equipment, some tasks are simply impossible, no matter how good you are. With some efforts, having better tools makes the job easier and faster, but you still need the minimum skill set to know what to do with those tools. Having mediocre or minimal tools will increase the difficulty and/or the time required.

### **Weather Or Not**

Even easy and straight-forward activities be-

come difficult, or even impossible, if the conditions are bad. For example, driving in icy conditions requires some skill, but driving fast requires more. The increased difficulty of bad conditions can turn what would normally be a success into a failure unless the characters find some way to counteract or compensate for the conditions. Ideal conditions usually do not decrease the difficulty, though they certainly make the task more pleasant and perhaps faster. In fights, local conditions and tactical circumstances, such as elevation, cover, and darkness, can have a significant effect on the outcome.

### **A Little Help**

Having assistants can greatly increase efficiency, but they can also get in the way and make things slower. Often times, throwing more people at a problem does not resolve it any faster. The aid and advice of others can turn what would be marginal result into an unqualified, but not spectacular, success. The ability level of the assistants must be on par with the sub-tasks that are delegated to them. With the proper help, managed effectively, the time required for a task decreases while the quality potentially increases. Some physical tasks, like pushing a stalled car off the road, benefit greatly from teamwork; others, like throwing a rock, do not.

### **A Matter of Story**

The GM may be tempted to increase or decrease the difficulty to add or remove obstacles and challenges for the characters. If the GM wants (or needs) the PCs to succeed, then the difficulty should be set such that they can. If the GM wants (or needs) the PCs to fail, then its best for the GM to spend karma tokens against them; otherwise, the PCs can use karma tokens to succeed no matter the difficulty.

The GM should never set a high difficulty simply for the sake the story, perhaps forcing the players to spend karma tokens, because it will ring false, creating a lousy story and disgruntled players. There may be good reasons, unknown to the players, why the task is more difficult than it may appear, and it may be useful to inform them of this (though not necessarily the specifics) lest they feel the GM is pulling a fast one.

**Organizing Campaign Notes**

In my great list of weaknesses as GM, it isn't the organization of campaign notes, but rather creating them in the first place.

I never take notes during the session except to write down NPC names I've made up so that I'll remember them later. In a playtest for the game I'll be running at DunDraCon, I jotted down places where I needed to fill in details. There can be confusion at the start of a session, especially if there has been a long (often unexpected) break between sessions. I rely on my players as much as they on me to remember exactly what happened. There usually aren't significant disagreements and somehow we muddle through.

As a player, I take as many notes as I can while still being engaged in the game. I learned in college that I can either take notes or pay attention,<sup>5</sup> not both. For me, taking notes can be more disruptive to character immersion than rolling dice. This can be frustrating when the GM has created an intricate and complicated plot that can only be dissected through careful and deliberate note taking.

I am not much of a world builder. I don't create dozens of pages of notes on people, places, and events. I'm lucky to get down a few pages worth and make up the rest either just before or during the session. And since I don't run years-spanning campaigns, I never have to face the mountain of notes, background, and past history. I don't have rosters of former PCs and NPCs.

I usually create a mental outline of what is going to happen and sometimes this finds its way onto paper. My campaign notes end up being a mishmash of hand-written journal entries that may or may not end up on the computer, and computer files that I sometimes forget to print out or leave on my desk at work. I usually manage to write up the stats of NPCs for combat purposes, but if I don't need to know the skill ranks of a particular NPC (which is most of them), I may just have a few sentences of description. It helps that I rarely use what could be considered a "GM PC" and so the need for a full character sheet is also rare.

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5 One might ask how I can take notes *without* paying attention. What happens is that I end up with notes that I don't understand because I was too busy writing to absorb the meaning or context of what it was I was trying to learn and/or remember.

**Michael Cule**

I liked that you included "Sense of Duty: Close Friends and Companions" to your list if required disadvantages.

I have two comments about your tale of having a swashbuckling PC trying and failing to jump between planes. I think this is one of those times when "setting stakes" makes sense. But rather than make it a formal, mechanical thing, it just needs the GM to say, "And if you fail this, you know you'll die, right?" Or the player can say "And if this doesn't work, I'll plummet to my death."

On the other hand, are such deaths really in genre? If I was watching this on the big screen, I'd expect the character to fail, but then manage to grab onto the tail of the plane. I'd also expect to howl at how inconceivable that was. But then, I'd howl even louder if the character made the jump! This is why I don't run (and rarely play) pulpish games. Some of my players, like Gil, tries to pull this kind of stunt all the time, and every time, it takes me right out of the game.

Good points on the aging of the mind and how the technology of immortality changes will change how we define humanity. I'm not sure how "post-human" would be willing to go for the sake of immortality. It depends on the drawbacks and trade-offs. What wouldn't I be able to do anymore?

**Lee Gold**

I am horrified at the thought of mindwiping couples before their nuptials. It is only through our past experiences (emotional and sexual) that we can truly appreciate and love our (future) spouse. Many people, if wiped of the memories of past romantic exploits, might question if they are ready to "settle down and get married." Even for couples who think this is a good idea, I think it is probably a bad idea.

**Joshua Kronengold**

In addition to Peter's input and Brian's comments to Michael last issue, I'd add "In a world of low interest rates, the market for mortgage securities is simply too big and profitable for many investors to ignore." Also, "The buyers of mortgage-backed securities include U.S. pension funds, hedge funds and insurance companies."<sup>6</sup> In other words, a recipe for global financial disaster.

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6 [http://bigpicture.typepad.com/comments/2005/08/global\\_investor.html](http://bigpicture.typepad.com/comments/2005/08/global_investor.html)

Your comments to Michael about the way someone could advance within the Tsolyanu "rigid" social system make me think that the traditional rpg trope of iconoclastic adventurers seeking fortune, fame, and power is so bloody American (traceable back through Western culture to Odysseus (or earlier)).

LOL (both times) at "blah, blah, politics,...."

### **Kevin Mantle**

Welcome!

I bought Heroic Worlds when it first came out and devoured it. I went to it recently before playing an eBay bid on a FASA Star Trek boxed set to make sure what edition it was and confirm it was something I wanted to get. For years, I pined for a new edition or volume, but I have long since given up that hope.

### **Brian Misiaszek**

RAE Futuristic Medicine.

### **Christopher Murray**

As a player, I'm usually less interested in the setting as I am in characters. While I accept that all worlds are black boxes, I usually don't try to figure them out or explore their various buttons, inputs, and outputs. As a GM, I follow the principle that anything that has not been established "on screen" is fair game to be changed. So long as I temper my "behind the curtain" fiddling and don't overly frustrate my players, I use the black box to add or remove complexity as needed to keep the game interesting.

You pointed out two things that really turn me off with DitV. When I played DitV, these two points conspired to make for a dreadful roleplaying experience. 1) It's too damn crunchy, fiddly, and *gamey*. 2) The emphasis is on narration, conflict resolution, and rolling dice, not roleplaying. Having the GM say "Great! Now roll the dice," might as well be "Ya, great, whatever. Just roll the dice."

### **Lisa Padol**

Thanks for the review of Unhallowed Metropolis. The rich finding a "loophole" in the cremation laws seem silly to me. What's so wrong with cremation that they would need a loophole? Or is it a case of displaying your wealth posthumously by having your body buried and guarded by Mourners? Memorial plaques and charitable donations aren't enough?

### **Brian Rogers**

Thanks for explaining your passive group of superheroes. You can only throw out so many hints and hooks; gamers and plot are like horses and water that way.

In my experience, awarding xp for game contributions does not raise them "out of the campaign's pay range." In my Sinister Things campaign, the PCs remained close in rank despite some players getting the lion's share of the bonuses. It also helped that the system is forgiving of level disparities. The xps for contributions are awarded as one-time bonuses only when the contributions are made, so I think your comments about Amber are misplaced. But your comment does illustrate a problem with GURPS-style disadvantages that I addressed ten years ago in these pages, in what I called the One-eyed Albino Syndrome, suggesting that disad points be given when the disad comes up in play and not at character creation.

### **Marco Subias**

"A spacefaring game involving anthropomorphic animals" you say? FYI, there have been three versions of an Albedo rpg based on the comic of the same name. There was also Justifiers, about uplifted animals exploring dangerous worlds. People on the Ironclaw Yahoo! group have discussed various "Starclaw" house rules. And I've seen a few "furrries in space" games on rpol.net, and played in one that was set in a Firefly-like universe.

If teacher/school/district performance is based primarily on test results, there is no incentive to teach beyond the questions of the test. Any curriculum that goes beyond rote memorization of facts and plugging numbers into formula is wasteful and endangers the test scores and the teacher/school/district. There is also a strong incentive to cheat.<sup>7</sup>

### **Steven D Warble**

Good luck with DitV if you ever play it. My experience with it was pretty terrible, as my comments to Chris Murray indicate. I like the setting, but the mechanics drove me batty and actively got in the way of my immersion-based roleplaying. It's not the game for me, but a lot of people like it.

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<sup>7</sup> As discussed in the first chapter of *Freakonomics*.