Using the "Sandbox Method" for Story/Mission Development

Kathryn Burke:

For those who are new to this presentation, I'm Kathryn Burke. I mostly sim in Theta Fleet, but I'm also in 16th Fleet, RPGW and I am on an independent sim. I've been in other fleets over the years, and I've seen some...interesting missions.

Over the years, I've learned from what I've seen and have come up with what I think is a good blend of mission creation and seat-of-your-pants simming.

I choose to call it the "Sandbox Method" because it reminds me a lot of the way kids play in sandboxes.

Those of you who have gone through any sort of command course have heard about roadblocks or red herrings.

They're basically obstacles you put in the way of solving a mystery, or completing a mission.

Game masters are taught that a mission needs certain key ingredients. Some fleets give you a step-by-step guide for how a mission should progress. While this is good, it can be too rigid. Not all stories or missions will follow the same basic steps.

Players like to be able to put some of their character's expertise or personality into their tags and their actions. This can often go contrary to what you've planned. That's why I like to use this method of mission creation.

If you have a comment or question, feel free to jump in.

It's a method that works for me in writing and in mission creation. Hopefully some of it will work for you, too.

In writing, I also like to have a rough idea of where I'm going and how I want the story to end, but I will change things up as I go because if the characters start going in a different direction, I'll explore it--keeping the general ending in mind. I will adjust the climax and resolution accordingly.

Design your story/mission with an end in mind. Don't be too sold on it, unless it has to happen a certain way. If it does, you need to let people in on it so they can help steer the story. This, in my opinion, should be used rarely.

Think of it as building a sandbox. You need a frame. A solid boundary to contain the story. It can be a star system, a planet, a series of events. The boundaries of where your mission can go. (edited)

It's basically the "rules" of this mission, along with the rules of your sim.

Fill the sandbox with sand so that people will want to play. Something enticing. That's your hook. The brief description that gets people interested. Basically, you want to get them thinking and coming up with ways they can play in your sandbox.

The sandbox can also be your world, the planet, the culture, the environment. But it's constrained by the frame, or boundaries.

In a story, it can be the worldbuilding.

Once you have the sand, add a few toys. Some trucks, a shovel, maybe some plants or a cave. This includes the events that have to happen, people you'll encounter, roadblocks that make solving the problem harder. They're not in any one particular place so that the players can move them around.

The frame is a solid barrier. You don't cross it.

The sand is more flexible. You can mold it, move it around, but if it escapes the frame, it's "lost."

The "toys" are the things you can move around and mess with.

Not all the "toys" will be played with. If one aspect of your mission/story is skipped, work around it or just do without it. If you don't get to a roadblock, that's fine. the point is to build off what your players do and make it fun.

You put the toys in the sandbox, but give the players the flexibility of playing with them or not.

If it's important, move the toy to where it becomes more visible.

libbalou:

Can you give an example of something which would be a frame you don't cross?

Kathryn Burke:

Basically, put it where a player will see it, or tell a player something you'd like them to do to be sure a certain twist happens.

Otherwise, just play off what the others do.

Most sandboxes have more toys than you play with or that you can play with (not all are left outside). So, if you don't play with all of them this time, fine. It just means you can use them later.

@libbalou - Can you give an example of something which would be a frame you don't cross?

Kathryn Burke:

The politics or laws of the planet is one.

A Meowy (Alison):

That's why I like 24/7 live simming . For the freedom of others In sandbox and a general direction with ability of a lot of change. Acalltoduty us to be over an hour and had this type mindset for the limited and made it fun an easy. Most short-term Sims now seem overly strict... These freedom ones for any time zone participation allows that. :-) Same with Nova/PBEM. How can we encourage more people to use their sims to be more open minded over limited?

Kathryn Burke:

You cross that 'frame' then you get in trouble.

If the team is going to an alien ship, you as the game master know what will be there, and what won't. While the crew has flexibility in what they can do, if the alien ship is from the 25th century, for example, they can't make it one from the past.

If the mission is to recover some kidnaped colonists, you're not going to end up on a pleasure cruise--unless that's where they were kidnapped from.

That's basically what I'm referring to. Your players can add twists and turns, they can change parts of the mission, but the core should remain constant. Rescuing kidnapped children, saving a colony, exploring a ship. Otherwise, there are no real boundaries to the story and it won't make sense in the long run.?

Yeah. I've been on some very strict sims where you can't do anything that will affect the mission. That's not fun.

If the mission is to recover some kidnaped colonists, you're not going to end up on a pleasure cruise--unless that's where they were kidnapped from

Yuuki:

tbh that sounds fun

libbalou:

Thank you for explaining that. It makes sense that the frame needs to be broad principles

Kathryn Burke:

You should have plenty of leeway to come up with elements of the mission, and to develop your character while still keeping to the basic mission.

@A Meowy (Alison) - That's why I like 24/7 live simming . For the freedom of others In sandbox and a general direction with ability of a lot of change. Acalltoduty us to be over an hour and had this type mindset for the limited and made it fun an easy. Most short-term sims now seem overly strict... These freedom ones for any time zone participation allows that. :-) Same with Nova/PBEM. How can we encourage more people to use their Sims to be more open minded over limited??[?3:25 PM]? Amanda Rose: ? I don't stay on sims that have strictness. Period. I don't write to someone else's story. I want my characters to have a life.

Kathryn Burke:

Absolutely. So do I.

I like being able to see what the basic mission is and add my own bits to it. To not fundamentally change it, but to bring in more.

I like the flexibility of reacting to a situation in character and having fun rather than having to do exactly what the CO dictates.

One of my first sims was that way. The CO put out a monthly newsletter that gave instructions for every department for that month. I didn't stay long.

I may not be as clear as I think I am--or hope I am. I'm talking mostly about the framework, the skeleton. Then you let the crew build the structure or creature. They're constrained by the framework, but the details are entirely up to them.

And please, if I'm not clear enough, ask. Text leads top obfuscation.

Going back to the sandbox analogy: ?

Now that you have the frame of your sandbox, filled it with sand, and tossed in some toys, it's time to invite your friends. This is where the creativity comes in. And where you need to be flexible.

Let your players come up with their own tweaks and ideas. Quite often, where they go with the mission is better than what you planned. Run with it. Tweak your mission mid-stream. If you have to divert from the ending you chose a little, do so. Find a way to get most of what you want while building off what your players are doing with the mission.

There has been a time or two where the mission took a 45-degree turn, but it was so much better that way, and more fun.

Side trips are also a lot of fun. If you're exploring an underground cavern, a ship, a colony, let your crew find things, enter rooms, run into something or someone. That's up to them.

It's like letting them decide which toys to play with, and how.

Don't we all like to feel a part of the mission? that what we do as a player, as a character, contributes? As a CO/GM, you have to allow for that. You have to build it in to any missions you create.

Let your players choose who to talk to, or not. Let them discover something and then play off it.

There's an improv game called "Yes, and..." The premise is that one person says or does something and another builds off that.

If one player sees an odd-looking plant, another comments on it or goes to look. Don't ignore it, play with it. You respond with something positive in return. You build off what the person said or did.

Otherwise, it's blocking. You block the other player from saying or doing anything.

I've been on sims where the other player will give me two tags. I'm okay with that because I can still build off both. But if I get four tags, and they force me to respond in a specific way that is NOT something my character would do or say, I'm being blocked.

In that case, I will often answer as my character would anyway. Even if it means the tag I was given doesn't fit at all. That' snot my problem because I wasn't given the option. I hope the other player will notice and adjust accordingly. Usually, I'll leave an OOC to indicate what I did and why and give the player a chance to edit.

If the player refuses and expects me to simply follow instructions, I won't do another post with that player.

I don't like missions that do the same. I don't like being told what I can do and how I should do it. That's not fun, and it's not cooperative.

I was (briefly) on a sim where the Game master wrote four missions ahead. Each mission was dependent on the one before. Only the CO/XO and a key player or two were able to do anything that affected the outcome because they didn't want the ending to change from what they wrote. That left most of the crew to do repairs, or talk to people that couldn't affect the outcome. Basically, the players were shackled to what the CO told them they could do. That's not fun for anyone. If you want to have tight control on your mission, have a crew of four or five where you all know where you're going and run everything.

That is not what this presentation is about. It's about the cooperative part of roleplaying while still maintaining a basic mission outline.

Remember that you have your frame to keep the players from going too far. Sometimes you have to gently tell a player they can't do that because of x or y. Let them know what they can do instead. Give some of your players key roles in the mission and make sure that each mission you allow some of your crew to have a moment to shine.

If your crew knows the basic parameters, they'll work with them and they'll come up with ideas. I think I've altered my original mission idea about 70% of the time. Not drastically, but the other players give me ideas that are far better and I'll go with them. Even if they don't tell me in advance, by using "yes, and..." I'll work with them on the idea and we'll end up with something better than I envisioned. That's what I like about cooperative storytelling.

If you have to pull a player aside and tell them why they can't do something, do it early. Don't wait until others follow and you lose control of your mission. A gentle word as soon as you notice a comment or action that will fundamentally break your mission, or your sim canon, say something. It's easier to make a short course correction than to rewrite an entire post. (Note: this is rare, but it does happen.)

I have been on sims where the CO chose to do nothing. The player was new and didn't know what led up to the particular mission and so started doing things that went contrary to ship canon. It caused a lot of trouble because the long-term players tried to help the newbie, but they wouldn't listen. Several players left the sim because the Co didn't want to correct the new player.

This, too, is rare, but as the CO/GM, our job is to help new players and to encourage creativity while allowing for character development.

So, sometimes we get to act as moderator so that everyone is on the same page and we can all work together. That's part of the reason for a framework to your sim and your missions. To keep the basic world consistent.

I hope that makes sense.

Unless you have a small crew, you can't give everyone important roles in every mission. So, change it up. Use different departments in each mission. Yes, some are needed more than others, but you can always find something to add.

I like to have two different foci going on at a time. If there's an away team going down to a planet, then there's something happening on the ship, or there's a problem somewhere else that needs attention.

When you're writing a novel, you'll have your A storyline with your protagonists and a B storyline with your sidekicks, your villain, etc. Do this with your mission. Have a main storyline, and have a secondary storyline. Throw in some opportunities for character development.

Give your crew opportunities to be the hero/protagonist and opportunities to have a

If you build in flexibility, you give your players more control over their characters and more freedom to have fun and come up with their own twists and solutions. Then you, as CO/GM get to come up with creative ways to counter or run with what they do. So, in essence, you get to play as well.

That's why flexibility is so important.

I get ideas from what my crew does, and I can have fun with NPCs not knowing exactly what is going to happen because of it. We all enjoy the mission more, and we can all have fun being creative.

Remember, it's easy to change up the toys in your sandbox, and it's easy to let one of your other players toss things in from time to time. Experiment, ask for help, and most of all, have fun. That's why we all write together.

Gregory:

Don't be so stiff that you can't change things when a player brings up an idea that you might not have considered!

Kathryn Burke:

So, basically, create a frame rather than a step-by-step mission. Using a D&D analogy, if you need your adventurers to go to a specific hill and find a specific cave, let them explore a bit.

If they go too far in the wrong direction, move the cave. They'll still get to it, but they can do it their way.

Using plot points like toys in a sandbox, you let the crew have control over the toys they play with and how they choose to use them. Then you adapt around them. You're still getting the basic mission done, but they have more creativity.

I hope that makes sense, and I hope you found something you can take to your own sims and implement. We all sim for fun. Creating missions should be fun for you. You should also have fun writing them with your players.

@Gregory - Don't be so stiff that you can't change things when a player brings up an idea that you might not have considered!

Kathryn Burke:

Yes. Because they almost always will.

And quite often, it's better.

@Kathryn Burke - I hope that makes sense, and I hope you found something you can take to your own sims and implement. We all sim for fun. Creating missions should be fun for you. You should also have fun writing them with your players.

Cambrensis:

I've been reading along and this has inspired me

Kathryn Burke:

Thank you.

And thank you all for your participation.

Remember, it's easy to change up the toys in your sandbox, and it's easy to let one of your other players toss things in from time to time. Experiment, ask for help, and most of all, have fun. That's why we all write together.