

GMing

The GM, far from being the master of the game or director of the story is more like a master of ceremonies. The person who makes sure everyone at the table gets a chance to speak and who helps set the tone and scope of the world the Wanderers inhabit. As a GM, you have a few responsibilities:

Create Issues

Frame Scenes

Create and Portray NPCs

To help guide you in how you fulfill these responsibilities, there are some principles that you need to follow:

Obey The Rules

Be Honest and Fair

Take An Interest In The Wanderers

Creating A Town's Issues

A big part of your role as GM is to set the stage for jobs your Wanderers will take by filling the towns you've created with **Issues**. Issues are problems caused by the actions or presence of outlaws or monsters that threaten the safety and security of the town from without or within. The **Issue** facing a Town is the problem, the danger that has been making them suffer.

Examples: *The children of Auyai are born blind, malformed, and mouthless and die soon after. The youth of Lucrenzia flock to a daring outlaw who promises them freedom from taxation if they join his ragged banner. Young lovers in the town of Goodlake go missing, only to be found dead days later, their heart ripped from their chests.*

The **Expression** is the straightforward and obvious cause of the Issue in the opinion of the people who live in and around the Town, and the first thing that the Wanderers notice. This is what the Wanderers will be hired to put an end to or solve, usually with brute force or deceit. It's never the only reason why the town is suffering, but rather the symptoms of a deeper issue.

Example: *The elders of Auyai believe that a settler sorcerer cursed their children for the people to let him pilfer their people's sacred mountain. They know him as a ruthless, vile*

man who will do anything for power. They're right, but the taint that has spread from the tower was not a sorcerer's curse, but the influence of a powerful spirit of blight the sorcerer had summoned but bound imperfectly. By the time he realized his mistake, he had been transformed into a minion of the wretched thing, endlessly striving to free it's creator from it's slipshod prison.

The **Source** is the systemic or underlying cause of the problem facing the town. It's the factor in the town's distress that will lead to something like this happening again days, weeks, months, or years down the road. The **Source** needn't come from inside the town, the machinations of far-off kingdoms, the motions of the stars, or a history of oppression and exploitation can all breed problems perpetually like a rotten log grows mushrooms. Whether it's cause is fantastical or grounded in ugly reality, the Source of an Issue should always have a societal element to it and require significant change to solve. Change that's difficult for Wanderers, as rootless outcasts to muster without breaking a few eggs.

Example: *The Sorcerer's tower is a ruined remnant of an inhuman civilization that predated the First Peoples. The Auyaiians hold it as taboo, and had kept it from discovery from centuries before their erstwhile allies, the Meridian merchant republic discovered the half-sunken remnants of the tower when a trade caravan was waylaid by woeweavers and took refuge within its walls. Since then, antiquarians have flocked to it and excavated much of the structure.*

The elders of the tribe, horrified by the sacrilege but needing to maintain their alliance with the Meridians secured considerable trade privileges and coin, as well as tribal elders positioned alongside the dig team to supervise the process. But this didn't stop the Meridians from installing what would be the first of several sorcerers within the tower as a bulwark against the Swalu peoples to the east, who are the Auyaiian's ancient enemies.

The sorcerers before Belasis were both criminally irresponsible and unschooled in the powers and spirits of this region but it was Belasis's attempts to Summon the shades of ancient serpent-folk from beneath the tower that awoke the ancient evil slumbering beneath. These, and other crimes have turned the Auyaii against the Republic but with the ruin that's been visited upon their offspring and the Swalu stepping up their raids, they need allies more than ever.

For now, their magi have managed to keep the worst of the blight at bay, but such measures are only temporary. They have sent emissaries to the republic, but who knows if they will be able to secure terms. Many amongst the elders of the tribe believe

their only recourse is to call the other members of the western confederation to a council of war, to raze the ancient tower to the ground.

Make It Personal

Once you've established an **Issue**, it's **Expression**, and it's **Source** it's time to make the Job about more than just Coin. Choose one or more of your Wanderer's Disgraces to tie to it, either directly or thematically. Which of the two you do depends on whether you want play to primarily focus on further exploring the events of a Wanderer's Disgrace and how it shaped them, or provide a way for them and the rest of the crew to engage with the same sort of moral questions that the Wanderer(s) whose Disgrace you're using did.

Directly tying one or more elements of a Town's Issue to a Wanderer's Disgrace means figuring out how their Disgrace, or the forces behind it, directly contributed to the problems facing the town. Whenever possible, draw as straight a line as possible between the problems facing the town and what one or more of the Wanderer's in your crew did in their past. If you must complicate it, tie it to the forces behind the Wanderer's Disgrace, or introduce complications relating to another Wanderer's past.

Example: *If one of the Wanderer's became disgraced amidst the children of Auyai for apprenticing under an outsider wizard, perhaps it was Belasis or one of his apprentices. Have one of the apprentices offer to hire the crew, begging them to put an end to the horrors that they fled from in the sorcerer's tower, and destroy the font of power within.*

If another member of the crew was affiliated with the Lucrenzian government and disgraced in a failed coup, you can complicate the situation by having an agent of the government offer to hire the crew to exterminate the horrors within and guard a sorcerer of the crown while she reinforces the protective wards

Characters could choose to accept either job, with or without trying to negotiate different terms, or could accept both and try to play the different sides against each other to secure a larger payday.

Tying a Town's issues to a Disgrace thematically lets you directly interrogate the attitudes, actions, or identities that led to their Disgrace. Ask yourself why they were disgraced, and pose it as a question through the events of the Job. If their Disgrace was a matter of violating social norms or belonging to a marginalized group, put them in situations where they're forced to decide what they'll risk to stick up for others who are similarly strange or outcast. If they took action to Disgrace themselves, create situations

that ask if they would do it again, and where the line is, until you have a clear answer through play.

Dig deep, and aim for hard-hitting questions that can't be answered with an ambivalent shrug or a thoughtless yes or no. Ask these questions naturally through play, by introducing situations that beg the question. Then complicate the question by introducing outside factors which conflict with the easiest answer. As with Issues related to the exact circumstances of a character's Disgrace, the easiest way to do this is through the Crew's choice of employers with different motivations and goals, closely followed by contrasting the answer you think is most straightforward with the goals and priorities of other members of the Crew.

If you want to complicate this further, compare and contrast the themes from two different Disgraces and put them in a situation where they're forced to choose between the two outlooks. This is particularly effective when the characters have conflicting Purposes. If one Wanderer wants to win the other's heart, and the other wants to take revenge on them for a past wrong then you're primed to create a taut web of drama and intrigue between them that you'll see play out amidst the action of the Job.

Example: *A Wanderer Disgraced for poisoning their dying husband to hasten his long, painful death by disease should be asked, at least once "Will you kill again to end this person's suffering?" Not outright, by another character, but by the situation they're faced with. In the sorcerers tower, introduce apprentices wracked with blight, slowly transforming into servants of the spirit that awaits within the Tower's cellars. They wish only for death, or more desperately for a cure, but at the same time they would prove useful guides in a tower corrupted by black magic and filled with slaving horrors.*

All the better if another member of the Crew wishes to keep and study the half-blightlings, or bind them into their service with magic. Will they compromise the principles which drove them out of society?

Create NPCs with Strong Opinions and Plans

Once you've established your Issue, decide who that's connected to the town has a strong opinion and plan for dealing with it. The Wanderers are deadly, competent, and professional, but even if they were once residents they're not connected to it in the way that civilians are.

Start with at least two of these NPCs, people with strong ties to the community and an important role to play. When you do, use the rules for **Creating NPCs** to give them Attributes, Skills, Strengths, Lore, Ties, and (if relevant) sorceries. Then decide how

they relate to the Issue at hand by choosing a motivation and a means by which they'll try to accomplish it. Aim here to complicate the Issue by creating NPCs who seek to profit from, ignore, or even exacerbate the Issue, or whose solutions to the problem will cause problems (moral and practical) for the Wanderers. Twist the knife here where you can, and whenever possible force them to choose between their morals, their profit, and their purposes.

Creating NPCs

As part of creating Issues and framing Scenes you'll come up with non-player characters or NPCs; characters that you portray and whom you roll for to determine the outcome of their efforts. Your Wanderers will also no doubt establish a few NPCs by establishing that they **Know Someone** or that this is **My Neck of the Woods**.

Describing NPCs

Before you worry about anything else, when a Wanderer encounters an NPC in the course of a scene or seeks out an NPC by declaring that they **Know Someone** describe them. Doing so grounds the NPC in the fiction of the game in a way that makes them feel like they could be a real person.

When describing NPCs, make sure to mention:

What Makes Them Stand Out
What They're Doing and How
Why The Wanderers Might Care

Types of NPC

NPCs fall into a few categories based on their importance to what's going on in the fiction.

Set Dressing: When you're using **Soft Scene Framing**, particularly in a town or other populated area there are going to be numerous characters going about their business. Birds and beasts calling and creeping through underbrush, or merchants hawking their wares in one of the trade cities of the Auyai confederation don't need stats, a name, or more than a brief description unless a Wanderer begins to interact with them, or they're directly impacted by events going on in the scene.

Those swallows and sparrows in the trees might become relevant if a Wanderer Summons them to swarm a Wyvern. Those old men laying out a game of stones outside a saloon could become relevant if a Wanderer making their case to a crowd

uses one of them as a rhetorical device, or if a ruffian gets tossed through their table in the course of a brawl.

Unnamed or Minor NPCs: NPCs that are involved in a scene but that don't have an established name, or complex motivations are unnamed NPCs. They're important to a scene only insofar as what they're doing. The hypnotized servants of a woods witch, a pack of rabid curs set upon you by a hunter with a dark secret, a venal palace jailer holding out for a bribe.

When you first introduce an unnamed NPC, give them only the stats you need. If you know the palace jailer is an ignorant boor but stubborn and tough you can give them Steel 3, Lore 1, Silk 1 and worry about deciding on their Shadow if it becomes relevant. Unnamed NPCs also have a motivation; the thing that they want to accomplish in the scene they're in. This should be simple and direct.

Don't bother giving Unnamed NPCs Strengths, Skills, Ties, Lore, or Sorcery unless such abilities are integral to their characters. If a Wanderer takes an interest in an unnamed NPC (such as by declaring that you know them, Spouting Lore about something they're doing, or establishing something about them using My Neck of the Woods), you can always flesh them out further.

If you have multiple unnamed NPCs of a similar sort: a pack of wolves, an angry mob, a group of hired toughs put them together as a group, decide who's leading it and how many NPCs make it up, then establish it's stats as a group.

Named NPCs: These are NPCs Wanderers are connected to, that they've taken an interest in, or who have a strong tie to the Issues facing the town. Give them a full suite of Attributes, and as many or as few Strengths, Skills, Ties, Lore, and Sorceries as are appropriate for them.

Every named NPC should have at least one Motivation that ties them to the Issues facing the town. This motivation doesn't need to be something that they acknowledge or understand about themselves, but it should be something that drives their actions and which serves as a guide for the GM. Choose 1-3 Motivations for each NPC you name as part of creating the town, or for any NPC who becomes named during play. When you do, choose one or more means by which they'll try to accomplish it.

To Profit From The Issue Through _____

To Uncover The Truth of the Issue Through _____

To Solve the Issue Through _____

To Ignore The Issue In Favor of _____

To Downplay the Issue Through _____

To Exacerbate the Issue Through _____

Then fill in the blank with one of the Means listed here:

Violence

Deception

Moralizing

Politicking

Rabble Rousing

Religious Devotion

Sorcery

Nosing About

Research and Study

It's possible for an NPC that started out as set dressing or as a minor NPC to become a named NPC; encourage this. If a Wanderer's involving themselves in an NPC's business, give them a name if they don't already have one, flesh out their stats, and choose a motivation for them from the list.

NPC Stat Scales

0: Utterly Incapable. Can't make rolls using this Attribute.

1: Feeble, Ineffectual, Weak

2: Solid, Competent, Average

3: Skilled, Talented, Promising

4: Exceptional, Experienced, Notable

5: Astounding, Veteran, One in a Million

6: Legendary, Amongst The Best, Unique

NPCs and Strengths, Skills, Ties, Lore, and Sorceries

NPCs aren't created using the same rules as Wanderers. Don't give Set Dressing NPCs Strengths or the like: their capabilities aren't important to the story. Only give unnamed NPCs Strengths, Skills, Ties, Lore, and Sorceries if it's integral to who they are, and only a couple at most. If a Wanderer goes around paying hired guns to back them up in a scrape, it's fair that they'd have **Feats of Arms**.

Give Named NPCs as many or as few special abilities as you need in order to ensure that they make sense in the town. It'd be strange if the queen of an extensive network of thieves didn't have Ties to Prisons Dark and Dank, Bustling Marketplaces, and Wretched Slums. It'd be equally strange if a sorceress sworn to a fire god didn't have Calling.

You should have a clear idea of how an NPC will make use of the abilities you're giving them. If you can't think of how an NPC would use an ability during a session, then odds are they don't need it.

Monsters

Unnatural beasts, spirits, and fiends don't have the same relationship to a town's Issue that it's human residents and neighbors do. Monsters don't have complicated relationships with Issues. They cause them, by virtue of their nature and needs or they complicate an Issue by presenting an obstacle to the people trying to solve it.

That's not to say that a Monster has to be culpable for an Issue. A monster might be entirely blameless. It might even be trying to help, but what makes a monster monstrous to humans is deep differences in their needs and perspective.

Example: *A man of the woods, a spirit of bark and leaf maims anyone who enters the forest carrying axe or flame. To such a spirit, it's clear that the maimed beings will sprout new limbs when spring comes.*

Types of Monsters

Unnamed Monsters are dangerous primarily because of their great numbers and aren't capable of great things individually. Skull rats, who tie their minds together or a flock of cliff ghouls are great examples of unnamed monsters: individually they're no more threatening than a coyote. As a swarm, they're deadly.

Named Monsters are dangerous and impactful all on their own, and a tremendous threat in large groups. A named monster need not have a proper name; an epithet like "The Red Horror" is enough. Dark spirits manipulating the politics of a town's council, a family of ghouls who tempt the desperate into cannibalistic rites, or a great eagle with eyes of gold and claws of steel who sets themselves up as a judge of the town's iniquities are all examples of named monsters.

Creating Monsters

Monsters are not mere beasts. Or if they are, they are the beasts of a fargone era, when more baleful stars burned in the night sky and inhuman powers ruled the earth. To create a monster that fits the lore of your world, follow the steps below in order:

Is it of Flesh or of Spirit?

A creature of flesh is corporeal, even if it's body is made up of uncanny substances like solidified fire or congealed hatred. It can be fought with physical weapons, eats and drinks as a normal creature.

A creature of spirit is insubstantial and cannot be harmed by earthly weapons, but can only affect the material world with difficulty. It must **Exert Itself** to manifest physically, and can only do so for short periods of time without the aid of a sorcerer.

Describe Its Appearance

A monster's appearance is always unnatural. It need not be disgusting or horrific, but it is something completely unlike the natural world.

For a monster of flesh and blood, it's appearance should resemble a natural creature, corrupted by one or more of the following:

Mixed With The Features of a Different Creature (*A leopard with the face of a spider and the wings of a crow*)

Withered or Emaciated

Unnaturally Large or Corpulent

Bizarre Proportions

Unnaturally Beautiful

Mixed With or Made of Inanimate Material (*A cat of solid shadow, a salamander of flame, a massive toad with a poisonous flower growing from it's back*)

For a spirit choose one or more of the following concepts or forces, and describe how each plays into its appearance

An Elemental Force

A Landmark

An Emotion

A Beast

A Dead Soul

A Tragic Event

Give It A Need

Both named and unnamed monsters have a **Need** that they'll fulfill at any cost. This is the urge that drives them into conflict with mortals, even if their intentions are benign or they mean no ill. A monster's means of fulfilling a Need will always be disturbing, dangerous, or strange to mortals. Otherwise, folk wouldn't call it a monster.

Choose at least two Needs from the list below, and answer the questions associated with it:

To Consume *Does it eat and drink like a mortal would, or does it consume something stranger like dreams, emotions, or years of life? Does it eat to survive, or will it glut itself until there's nothing left? How is the town endangered by its appetites?*

To Corrupt *What does it ruin or warp and how? Does it do so intentionally, or as a byproduct of its presence? How is the town threatened by the changes it brings?*

To Avenge *What wrongs does it act against? How does it set them right? Why is it that the town believes this vengeance is evil?*

To Purify *What does it perfect or refine? Does it do so intentionally, or as a byproduct of its presence. Why does the town not see this as a gift?*

To Spread *Does it breed like mortals or beasts do? Is there a rite one must perform, or is it a contagion that turns creatures into more of its kind? Why does the town want to keep its numbers under control?*

To Lay Claim *What does it find valuable? How does it treat the things or people that it values? Does it hold notions of ownership or sovereignty or is this the territorial urge of a beast? Why can the Town not bring itself to allow the creature to stake a claim?*

Give It Sinister Powers

At this point, you know what the creature's nature is, what it looks like, and what it needs. Now it's time to make it truly monstrous.

Setting Scenes

You're not the director of the story, but you are the one who feeds the players their raw material. You put circumstances, events, scenery, and characters into the path of your player's Wanderers, and by how you present them you force them to make impactful choices that will change both the town and themselves. Learning how to set up scenes in a way that respects the agency of your player's Wanders is an important skill to develop as a gamemaster. This section is concerned with general principles to follow regarding setting up scenes, called **Framing Scenes** and **Ending** them which is exactly what it sounds like. Describing a scene during play gives you an opportunity to either give the players an opportunity to act, or force them to react.

Soft Scene Framing

The first is **Soft** scene framing, which presents a situation that offers things for a character to do, but doesn't force them to react immediately to something in particular. This doesn't mean leaving the players directionless, but it does mean describing their surroundings with an eye towards giving them interesting things to pursue no matter which direction they go.

Soft scene framing is the GM asking "Stuff is happening all around you. What are you going to focus on? Where do you go from there?" When you use soft framing techniques, do the following:

- Give them things to investigate or interact with.
- Suggest the start of something interesting.
- Describe NPCs and what they're doing.
- Show how their actions have changed the status quo
- Introduce a choice, without forcing a decision.

Hard Scene Framing

The second is **Hard** scene framing, which presents a situation that forces a choice or response. If soft scene framing is mentioning how your Wanderers smell smoke, Hard scene framing is describing a raging wildfire coming their way. It's something where if they ignore it, or refuse to act there will be immediate and significant repercussions. Hard Scene framing typically follows the outcome of your Wanderer's actions and NPC responses to them.

Example: *If a Wanderer gets knocked unconscious and dragged away by a vengeful*

woman who wants them to account for their crimes they might awake tied up in a dimly-lit frontier house with a knife at their throat and questions whispered in their ears.

These need not be negative: beginning a scene with their beloved proposing marriage is still hard scene framing. It's just hard scene framing built around a happy (though momentous) event. It's the GM demanding a choice, demanding action, even if that action is to let things happen. When you use hard scene framing techniques, do the following:

- Build on what's been established in the fiction through player action and agreed-upon lore. Hard scene framing that comes out of nowhere can feel jarring and out of place.
- Have an NPC roll to accomplish their goals.
- Demand attention and response.
- Show how their actions have decisive consequences.
- Introduce a choice they must make, where even failing to choose will have consequences.

The Structure of a Session

As part of character creation, you'll have established a number of Towns and placed them on a rough map of the frontier where your Wanderers will be working. Choose the one with the most connections to different characters. You'll want to start the game off with a bang, and setting the first session in and around a Town everyone has history with is the best way to do that.

Aim to keep the **Issue** and it's **Expression** for the first session simple and direct. A gang of vicious outlaws. A single terrible monster with unnatural powers that's killing people or desecrating the natural world. A feud between two families that threatens to boil over into violence. Something that affects the town, and perhaps the countryside nearby. Small scale troubles offer an easy introduction to a Wanderer's life, and give the player's characters more room to affect the outcome. As characters gain experience and develop their skills, you can always ramp up the stakes of the issues facing other towns.

Always Start With The Hiring Scene

Wanderers are obligate mercenaries. It's the only profession that they can legally hold, moving from town to town solving problems by force of arms, guile, or sorcery. Whether

you're kicking off the first game of a campaign, or your wanderers have finished up a job, resolved some personal business and are riding out for another town, always **start with hiring them.**

This is always a time to use Hard scene framing. Describe the person making the offer, the setting where the offer is made, and the words they use. Ask each of your players whether their Wanderer is privy to the negotiation or elsewhere. Then make an offer of payment.

Based on the character or characters privy to the negotiation, there might be some Wanderers who want to **Persuade** their employer to throw in a little extra. Let this happen, and when it does, don't be afraid to have their employer respond in kind with attempts to **Persuade** them as well.

There is also a chance that your Wanderers will walk out, either after receiving an insulting offer or after negotiations have broken down. If this is the case ask the players if their characters want to try a different town, or search for another employer. If they want to ride to another town, cut to **In Between Jobs** and use their activities to develop another Issue in another town. If they opt to seek out another employer, one or more of them might use their **Ties** to look one up, or wander around until they're approached by someone. In either case, repeat the process.

Sidebar: But I Wouldn't Go There!

In some cases there will be characters for whom it'd seem unlikely that they'd come back to a town where they murdered someone, stole valuable artifacts, and set the local temple to the God of Irony on fire. If they burned those bridges before they became a Wanderer they can't be hanged or beheaded for them. If they did so afterwards, then remind them that Wandering is a tough business where you take the jobs that come to you or you starve.

In the tradition of both Sword and Sorcery and deconstructionist westerns, 5s starts with characters who are down on their luck, low on coin and looking for a way out. The game is very open to many different approaches to taking jobs, but Wanderers have to take them. To do otherwise is to consign yourself to a life on the run or to slow starvation out in the wilds.

This goes double for established bands of Wanderers who won't put the work (and Coin) into rustling up jobs for themselves. If you don't find Jobs on your own, you're just going to have to take what fate gives you.

