

Writing for Choice of Games: Game Outlines

The Basics

We'd like a 10-12-page outline that includes:

- Title
- One-paragraph summary.
- List of major characters, including a line about why each of them is interesting and how they figure in the story.
- List of important stats.
 - At least five Primary Stats: personality traits or skills.
 - At least three Secondary Stats: goals.
 - Other important stats: relationships, money, etc.
- Ordered list of 8-12 chapters. Each chapter should have:
 - A summary of what happens in that chapter
 - 1-2 examples of important choices/decisions that take place in that chapter, including the results of each option
 - 1-2 examples of important stat tests that take place during that chapter, including the results of *both* success and failure in the test. (For example: "If you have high Confidence you can close the deal, which increases your Reputation; otherwise you fail and your Reputation decreases.")
- List of End States

Inclusivity

The PC's name, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and appearance must be determined by the player. It's OK for to choose these attributes for the purposes of the outline (eg, so that you can save time by referring to the PC as "she" in the outline rather than "he/she/they"), but make sure that your story will work with a PC of any gender, sexuality, etc. It's very easy to write code to accommodate for different names, genders, and appearances for the PC.

Choice of Games is **inclusive and egalitarian**. We have a very wide audience that includes people of many different genders, races, orientations, ethnicities, and life experiences. We want to make sure that all of our readers feel welcome in the environments of our games, and we want many different kinds of people to be able to create PCs who fully represent them.

Therefore, our games always include characters of multiple genders, races, orientations, ethnicities, etc. More importantly, our games always ensure that the player will have an equally fulfilling story regardless of the gender, race, orientation, etc. of the character that they choose to play. In particular, no gameplay options should be restricted to PCs because of those characteristics: ie, we don't want to see a game where if you choose to play a man you get to fight in the key battle, but if you choose to play a woman then you can't participate in the war at all.

We also strongly encourage authors to think outside traditional binaries of gender and orientation. So, for gender, this would mean including the option for the PC to be nonbinary, genderqueer, genderfluid, transgender, etc. For orientation, this would mean including the option for the PC to be bisexual, asexual, etc.

For some useful references on inclusive language about gender and sexuality, see GLAAD's reference guide here: <http://www.glaad.org/reference>

Here are some examples of the ways in which our existing games have approached inclusivity with regard to gender and orientation:

- Gender is irrelevant
 - The Fleet: The PC is never given a gender, and there are no romance options.
- Genderflipping
 - "Choice of Broadships": The PC is an officer in a single-sex navy. If the player chooses to make the PC a woman, then all sailors are women and the men stay at home. Regardless of the gender dynamics of the world, the PC can marry someone of the opposite sex and can romance their same-sex rival.
- Variable-gender NPCs
 - Affairs of the Court: At the beginning of the trilogy, the player chooses their PC's gender and orientation. That determines the gender and orientation of key NPCs. Also, to ensure that same-sex couples can fully participate in the gameworld's lineage-based royal politics, magic enables same-sex couples to become the blood parents of a child.
- Randomized Gender
 - Mecha Ace: The player can choose for romance-option characters to be randomly assigned a gender.
- Gender Diversity

- Hollywood Visionary: The player can choose from a wide range of genders and gender presentations for the PC, and each element operates independently – for example, the PC can have a masculine presentation *and* be called “Miss.”
- Performative Orientation
 - Choice of the Vampire: All NPCs have a fixed gender, and all romance-option characters can enter into a relationship with the PC regardless of the PC’s gender. It’s up to the player to choose which gender(s) their character is attracted to.

Our games also have **inclusive environments**. This means:

- there should be **NPCs of many races, ethnicities, genders, and orientations**.
 - Ethnic and racial ambiguity is fine; if you never refer to the protagonist's skin color, different players can assume whatever they like. But be aware of implicit ethnic cues like names.
 - There should be positive representations of multiple races, ethnicities, genders, and orientations. In particular, the PC shouldn’t be the only non-straight person in the game.
- about **half of the NPCs should be women and half of the NPCs should be men**.
 - There can be exceptions to both of these guidelines: if your game is set in feudal Japan, the absence of characters of African descent is not a problem; or, if your game is in a setting that was historically single-gender (as in the case of Choice of Broadsides), then it’s fine to have the majority of NPCs be the same gender as long as there’s an option for the PC to genderswap the environment. But unless there is a specific compelling reason not to do so, you should include substantial diversity.
- NPCs and their stories **should not play into stereotypes** of race, gender, ethnicity, etc. For instance, leaders shouldn’t all be men and shouldn’t all be white; nurturers and victims shouldn’t all be women; criminals shouldn’t all be people of color; same-sex romances shouldn’t all end in tragedy.
 - Avoid casual sexism, like “he’s crying like a girl”. (Characters in the game can be sexist, but make sure to be clear that it is the character, not the authorial voice, that is expressing these ideas.)
- Our games **do not endorse or perpetuate** rape culture, homophobia, or transphobia.
 - If your game includes one of these topics, it should be treated seriously and with respect for the victims. The PC should not be the one perpetuating these ideologies.

Stats and the ChoiceScript Machine

In ChoiceScript, stats are numerical variables that record the results of players' choices and what those choices represent about the PC (the Player Character: the person whose point of view the player takes during the game). They can represent personality traits, resources, relationships with NPCs (Non-Player Characters: all the other characters in the story), and much more. They come in two major categories: Primary and Secondary.

These stats are what drive the game – what we sometimes call “operating the ChoiceScript machine.” In the most basic terms, here’s how it works:

1. Primary stats get adjusted in early choices.
2. Primary stats get tested in later choices. Success or failure in these tests adjusts Secondary stats accordingly.
3. Secondary stats get tested near the end of the game to determine End States.

Primary Stats are personality traits and skills. They rise and fall as the result of players' choices.

There should be **at least five** Primary Stats. Make sure that your stats are sufficiently distinguished from each other: for instance, if you had both Strength and Athletics as Primary Stats, they would overlap with each other.

At least one Primary Stat should be an **Opposed Pair**: two contrasting qualities that represent opposed aspects of the PC's personality. It's even better to have more than one Opposed Pair; that will allow you to have much more nuance in the kinds of choices and characters that you build. Mechanically, when one stat in an Opposed Pair rises, the other one automatically falls. **Both sides of the Opposed Pair should be traits that a player might reasonably want for their character** – i.e., one side of the pair shouldn't be “better” than the other.

It may be tempting to make one of those opposed-pair stats Good/Evil. Please don't! First, we like our games to be more nuanced than that. Second, if there's a Good/Evil binary, then it's too easy for choices to fall into that same binary. (See below, on Choices.)

Some examples of good Primary Stats:

- Subterfuge
- Piloting

- Political Insider
- Generous/Selfish
- Obedient/Rebellious
- Spontaneous/Deliberate

Why these are good Primary Stats:

- because they can be used in many different circumstances
- because they say something about the character's skills and/or personality
- because they can have both benefits and drawbacks, depending on circumstances

Secondary Stats represent **what's at stake**. These can be goals (i.e., things that the PC wants); they can be things that the PC is trying to avoid; or they can represent the way the PC relates to the wider world. They (usually) rise and fall as the result of tests of Primary Stats.

There should be **at least three** Secondary Stats; preferably more. We're looking for stories in which the PC has **multiple goals**, not all of which can be achieved but all of which are interesting and desirable. Different players will choose different motivations for their characters, so there should be a wide range of potential goals and motivations to achieve them.

It's OK to have a few straight-up "scores" as Secondary Stats, but they shouldn't *all* be scores. Instead, they should track the PC's **progress towards their goals**.

One way to think of how to organize these goals is to compare it to high school or college:

- You're taking many different classes → there are many goals.
- Each class is graded separately → each secondary stat measures a different thing, and each operates independently of the others.
- Your natural interests and talents might mean that some classes are easier for you than others → the PC's primary stats may make it easier for them to advance towards some goals than others.
- You care more about some classes than others, so you may work harder at the ones you like → the PC can choose which goals matter to them.
- If you're in a club or a sport, that gives you less time to do your homework → **the PC will have to make difficult and interesting choices about which goals to pursue, because they can't pursue them all.**

Some examples of Secondary Stats

Overall Goals:

- Pendragon Rising: Acclaim: your level of fame as a leader
- Psy High: GPA
- Daring Mermaid Expedition: Evidence

Negative Consequences:

- Hollywood Visionary: Crew Stress
- Thieves' Gambit: Alert: if you fail a stat check in the course of your heist, it increases the chance that the police will be alerted.

Progress Towards Narrative Goals

- Psy High: Audition Success
- The Sea Eternal: Faye's Trust
- Empyrean: Revolutionary Zeal

Secondary stats can also be Opposed Pairs. For example:

- Choice of the Rock Star: Commercial/Indie: what kind of sound does your music have?
- Choice of the Pirate: Privateer/Pirate: how loyal are you to each of these ideologies?
- Slammed: Favor/Heat: are the fans on your side, or do they view you as a villain?

Other kinds of stats:

- **Resources:** These are things like Money and Supplies: resources that can be both gained and spent.
- **Relationships:** These keep track of relationships with different NPCs. Relationship stats can sometimes act like Primary Stats and sometimes like Secondary Stats: ie, sometimes they can rise or fall as the result of choices, and sometimes they can rise or fall as the result of success or failure in a test of other stats.

For more information on stats, how to design them, and how to use them, see our blog post on **Designing Great Stats**:

<http://www.choiceofgames.com/2011/07/7rulesfordesigninggreatestats/>

Goals and End States

Why are we talking about the end of the game now? Because when you're constructing a Choice of Games story, you always need to be aware of where you're

going in order to construct a story that travels to that destination in an interesting and meaningful way.

Also, it's important to note that we're not talking about "the ending" of the story. A good Choice of Games title will not only have many potential endings to the story, but will also have many potential variations on those endings: many different combinations of skills and personalities for the PC, many different combinations of experiences and relationships. That's why we talk about end *states* rather than just *endings*.

Some authors find it helpful to write the endings first and then work backwards to craft choices and decisions that lead to those endings. Even if that technique doesn't work for you, you should still make sure that your outline shows that your story has multiple potential end states.

You should have a lot of end states. Don't worry about having too many!

Here are some examples:

Choice of Broadides:

- Career: knighted, cashiered, disgraced
 - If disgraced, it could be a result of fleeing the battle with Villeneuve, avoiding it entirely, or being captured in the battle.
- Relationship with Villeneuve: Love, like, hate.
 - You can have duelled Villeneuve, and won, lost, or thrown the fight because of your love
 - Villeneuve can be alive or dead
- Health: you can be alive, maimed, or dead
 - If dead, you could have died in victory or in defeat.
- Marriage: you can be married to Hawthorne, Musgrove, West, or no one.

Psy High:

- Dating: Alison/Andrew, Carl/a, Taylor/Tyler, Haley, or nobody
- Parents: loving relationship, middling relationship, stormy relationship, or so bad that they've kicked you out.
- Drama Club: big role, small role, or tech crew
- The magical device: destroyed, enhanced, or controlled by you
- The fate of magic: given to everyone in town, enhanced the power of people who already have it, removed from the world, or kept all for yourself.
- The fate of the brainwashed students: cured, or still brainwashed (because you didn't want to cure them, or because you tried and failed)

- Mental status: totally fine, brainwashed (voluntarily or involuntarily), overloaded with magic
- Legal status: totally fine, arrested for vandalizing the school, arrested for selling drugs.
- Mr. Pierce: arrested, brainwashed, still principal, or governor
- Ms. Clay: arrested, brainwashed, still vice-principal, or principal

In both cases, note that **multiple end states exist at the same time**. In Choice of Broadsides, you can be healthy, disgraced, married to Hawthorne, but still in love with Villeneuve. In Psy High, you can be dating Haley and close to your parents, having also cured the brainwashed students and given magic to everyone in the town.

It's also OK for some of these endings to come at different points in the story, **but no ending should come earlier than 75% of the way through the game**.

Every ending should be awesome, even if it's a failure or a tragedy. There should be something dramatic and satisfying about every ending.

Examples:

- In Choice of the Dragon, the PC can get killed early...by getting struck down as divine retribution for setting themselves up as a false deity.
- In Choice of Zombies, the PC can succumb to the zombie hordes, but have the awesomeness of knowing that they were able to not only save their foster child, but also get word out about how to fight the zombies.
- In Hollywood Visionary, the PC's movie can flop at the box office, but get the awesomeness of having it turn into a cult classic

Chapter Summaries

For each chapter, we'd like a **one-paragraph summary** (about 200 words) of what happens in that chapter, plus **one or two examples of choices** that will take place in that chapter. You don't need to give a play-by-play of everything that happens; just a basic outline of the most important events and decisions.

For every choice, we want to know:

- The options
- The results of each option, both in terms of their effects on the stats and their effect on the story. However, we don't need to know the exact numbers of each stat change; all we're looking for is something like "Courage goes up" or "Honor decreases dramatically."

- If the choice is one that tests the PC's stats, we want to know the result of success *and* failure. ("The PC can try to enter the library through the side door. If their Stealth is high enough, they'll get in unnoticed and will find the book they're looking for, raising their Evidence. If not, the security guard will hear them and make them leave.")

The later chapters should also include a discussion of what might happen differently in those chapters if the player has made different choices earlier. For instance: "If the PC won the archery contest, the villagers will recognize him/her and help out. Otherwise, s/he'll have to win them over in some other way."

Special notes on the first chapter

- The opening of your game should be exciting: something that draws the player in, shows them what your story is about, and makes them want to keep playing.
- The first chapter is generally when the player chooses their character's name, gender, orientation, and other personal information. However, that should *not* be the sample choice in the outline. We want to see a choice that advances the plot and that's unique to your story.
- Avoid making the first chapter a dream sequence, simulation, or other scenario that isn't actually part of the story. We've had a lot of those already, and want to have a greater variety of opening scenes. Plus, we want the first chapter to show the player what the game is really like, so taking the player out of the reality of the story works against that goal.

Choices

Choices are the heart of our games.

A good choice should have balance, intentionality, and consequences.

1. **Balance:** No option should be objectively better or worse than the others. For example, if someone walked up to you and said, "what do you want? A million dollars, a sandwich, or a puppy?" most people would choose the million dollars. With the million dollars, they can buy a sandwich and a puppy, and still hire a limo to ride home in. That is a clearly unbalanced choice.

Most cases of imbalance in choices are less obvious, of course. Here are some other ways to maintain balance:

- When a choice adjusts a stat, make sure that each option adjusts the *same kind* of stat (ie, Tool stat vs Goal stat), and by roughly the *same amount*.
- Make sure that there are **no hidden benefits or hidden penalties** in choices. For instance, if you let the PC choose whether their favored weapon is a bow, sword, or mace, don't later decide that only the sword can slay the

- dragon. That makes one of the choices right and the others wrong, and that's unbalanced. (It also goes against the principle of intentionality: the PC can't make an informed decision for this choice because they don't know the potential results of their actions.)
- Make sure that there is no single way to optimize your choices or "win" the game: eg, "always choose your best stat" or "always choose the diplomatic option."

2. Intentionality: The player should always have enough information before a choice to know why they might want to pick each option, and what the potential results of their choice might be.

A standard (and frustrating!) practice in old choose-a-path gamebooks was to offer the options "Go right" or "Go left" without any more information about what was in each direction. Plus, one of those directions usually led to falling off a cliff. Don't do this! Instead:

- Indicate the relative risk of different options *before* the player chooses.
- Indicate (or imply) which stats might be useful in each option.

3. Consequences: The player's decisions should have real effects on the outcome of the story.

- Each option should lead to a meaningfully different result.
- The player's choices should be recorded through adjustments in stats, so that those stats can be called on later.
- There should never be an option for the PC to do nothing, or to ask an NPC to make the decision instead.
 - o Note: This does not mean that there can never be an option for the PC to say no. It means that the PC should always be the one making decisions. So, instead of an option that says "I do nothing," have an option that says "I stay quiet so that he doesn't know what I'm thinking," or "I rest so that I can save my energy," or "I decline, because I don't want to spend time with those people." Even when the PC says no, they're doing so in order to achieve a goal.
- The player's decision should never be undone, and there should never be an option that turns out to be impossible.
 - o It's fine if the PC can attempt the action and fail *based on a stat test*. But automatic failure, or a response of "you can't do that after all" is very frustrating. If the player is offered a chance to do something, it should be a real possibility.
 - True Story: one of the CoG editors was trying to sort out some issues with the IRS. The IRS website said "contact us by phone or mail." The editor called the phone number, and got a recording that said, "Contact us by mail only." This was

incredibly frustrating. So, don't be the IRS! Make all options real.

- Even when the PC fails in the short term, the plot should still move forward.

More information about designing good choices is available on our website, at: <http://www.choiceofgames.com/2010/03/5rulesforwritinginterestingchoicesinmultiplechoicegames/>

A good choice has at least three options, all of which are positive actions. There should be no yes/no choices, and no choices where there's an option to do nothing or to let someone else decide what to do.

Special Circumstances

1. **Randomness.** The main problem with randomness is that the player usually can't tell that it's random. They're expecting their choices to be the only variable in determining the outcome of the story, and may be confused or frustrated if it seems that their choices don't matter. Or, they can't tell the difference between randomly-determined outcomes and hard-coded outcomes, and the narrative effect of randomness gets lost. **In general, avoid randomly determined plot elements.**
 - o Exception to the Rule: Gender. Mecha Ace offered the option to randomize the genders of some NPCs. This worked because a) it randomized something that wouldn't ordinarily have any effect on the story, and b) the game told the player that randomization was happening.
2. **Events Without Choices.** In order to achieve delayed branching, sometimes events will have to occur no matter what the PC chooses. **Be very careful with this, especially if the event that has to happen is a bad one.** Players can get very frustrated if they feel that they've been set up to fail – and even if they succeed, they can also feel frustrated if they realize that their hard-earned victory wasn't actually earned after all.

Examples of Choices

The two major types of choices are Establishing Choices and Testing Choices.

Establishing Choices

Choices that establish the PC's personality and stats should show a clear correspondence between each option and the stat being adjusted. Here's an example from the work-in-progress Merc Life in the Magic City:

“The PC is on the phone with a recruiter who’s asking them about their past employment history, and why they’ve chosen the jobs that they have. They can reply:

- I pick lucrative jobs because my time and skills are valuable. (+Money, +Professional)
- I pick lucrative jobs because my communication abilities and rapport are valuable. (+Money, +Empathetic)
- I like to feel accomplished. I choose jobs that test and build my skills (+Rep, +Professional)
- I look for a positive team dynamic; it's important to feel comfortable with coworkers (+Rep, +Empathetic)”

Each option adjusts the same number of stats by roughly the same amount.

In addition, each option clearly indicates which stat is being adjusted, and the text of each one clearly shows why that option affects the stats that it does.

Testing Choices

These are choices that test the PC’s stats in response to a challenging situation. Testing Choices should not have “right” or “wrong” answers, just equally interesting approaches to the same situation. Here’s an example from The Hero of Kendrickstone:

“When the PC is ambushed by the bandits on the road, they have the choice of how to respond:

- By engaging the bandits in physical combat. (Prowess check)
- By attempting to sneak around the ambush. (Subterfuge check)
- By attempting to shield them self with magic. (Will check)
- By trying to talk the bandits down. (Eloquence check)

If the PC succeeds, they can either wound the bandits (with magic or weapons) or evade long enough for help to come. Otherwise, the PC is pinned down by the bandits' arrow fire, takes an arrow wound, and must be rescued by Dame Mildred when she arrives.”

This is the default for a Testing Choice:

- Each option checks a different stat
- Each option offers an equal chance of success.
- No option is inherently better or worse than the others.
- No success or failure condition is inherently better or worse than the others
- Even when the PC fails, the plot can still move forward.

As with the Establishing Choice above, each option clearly indicates which stat is being tested. In addition, the Testing Choice clearly indicates the results of success or failure in the test.

Another way to set up a Testing Choice is for the PC to have several potential goals, and each option allows them to work towards a different one. Here's a slightly-edited example from the work-in-progress *Chronicles of Mornland*. The PC is a noble trying to deal with the upstart Lord Marcus who has claimed some of the PC's land.

"How will you reclaim your land from Lord Marcus?

- Attack Lord Marcus to take the land back. Tests Prowess. Success eliminates Marcus as a threat and raises Glory and Wealth; failure leaves Marcus in power and reduces Prosperity.
- Ask Lord Marcus's priest to make him feel guilty for what he has done so that he will surrender. Tests Piety. Success eliminates Marcus as a threat and raises Religious Accomplishment; failure leaves Marcus in power and reduces Prosperity.
- Call on Queen Carmela for help. Tests Rel-Carmela. Success eliminates Marcus as a threat and raises Renown; failure leaves Marcus in power and reduces Prosperity."

As in the previous example, each option tests a different stat and each option offers an equal chance of success at defeating Lord Marcus. But each option also allows the PC to work towards a *different* goal in addition to that: either military Glory, Religious Accomplishment, or political Renown.

Variations on Testing Choices

- **Three-Level Results:** Instead of a simple success/failure result, you can have more nuanced outcomes of your tests. To take the example from *The Hero of Kendrickstone* above: you could instead have an outstanding success result in the PC subduing/evading all the bandits; a moderate success result in the PC subduing/evading a few of them; and a failure result in the PC needing to be rescued by Dame Mildred. This is more complicated than the default, but it's great game design, and we encourage you to use it if you can.
- **Higher Risk/Higher Reward:** Once in a while, one option in a choice can be more difficult than the others, and success can return a greater reward. To take the example from *The Hero of Kendrickstone* above, there could be an

option to challenge the bandit leader to single combat: it would be a harder test of Prowess, but passing that test would gain the PC more fame.

- **Spending for Success:** Once in a while, you can offer the player the chance to reduce a resource in exchange for success. Usually, this is money, but it can be another resource instead. So, again, building on the example from The Hero of Kendrickstone, there could be an option to bribe the bandit leader to stand down: it would greatly reduce the PC's wealth, but lead to an automatic success without the need for a stat test.

For more on how to design good choices, see our blog post here:

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Victory Design

There are several ways to structure what counts as "victory" in a game.

1. There are multiple goals to achieve, and the PC has to balance conflicting goals in order to accomplish more than one. Examples of games that use this structure:
 - a. Affairs of the Court: there are multiple political issues on which the PC must take action, and each course of action will please some NPCs and displease others.
 - b. Hollywood Visionary: the PC has to choose whether to prioritize professional or personal relationships, as well as choosing what qualities to emphasize in the film they're making.
2. There is one major question, but many ways to answer it, and those answers lead to different goals. Examples of games that use this structure:
 - a. Psy High: The PC discovers that their high school principal is Up To No Good. They can choose to sabotage the plot, support the principal wholeheartedly, or replace him with a better leader.
 - b. Mecha Ace: The PC acquires a new weapon for their interstellar war. They have to weigh the risks and benefits of using it, as well as their attitudes towards the war and their enemies in general.
3. There are multiple goals to achieve, but the PC can only do one per game. Examples of games that use this structure:
 - a. Choice of Robots: the PC always accomplishes a major goal in Chapter 6. However, there are four different versions of Chapter 6, and the version the player sees is determined by the PC's stats.
 - b. A Wise Use of Time: The PC can use their time-stopping ability in multiple different ways: to make money, to help their own career, to gain power for its own sake, to figure out what happened to their father, or to help spread good in the world. However, there is not

enough time to achieve all of those goals, so they have to prioritize one above the others.

In addition to these major goals, each game also has minor goals that the player can work towards. Success or failure in achieving these goals is independent of success or failure in achieving major goals. For instance:

- Choice of the Deathless: the PC can win several legal cases throughout the game, save a colleague from being possessed, or pay off their student loans.
- Psy High: the PC can get the lead role in the Drama Club play, win an academic or athletic scholarship, or get voted Prom King or Queen.

In all these cases, victory should be determined by the PC's stats. This is where Delayed Branching and the Choicescript Machine come into play. Overall victory in the game should be the result of the PC's *cumulative* achievements in the game – ie, the record of the PC's deeds as recorded in the stats.

Common Problems and How to Avoid Them

Binary Choices: This is one of the most frequent mistakes. Every choice should have at least three active options.

Passive Options:

Problem: The PC can choose to do nothing, or asks an NPC to make the decision for them.

Solution: The PC should always be the one taking action.

Disappearing NPCs:

Problem: A character is listed in the cast of characters, but never mentioned during the main body of the outline.

Solution: If you mention a character at the beginning of your outline, make sure you show how that character figures into the story. This is especially true of characters who are potential romantic partners for the PC: we want to see how the romantic plots intertwine with the rest of the story.

Unbalanced Stats:

Problem: One stat gets used much more frequently than the others, or is much more important to determining the End States of the game than the others.

Solution: Try to make sure that each stat can be equally useful. If you find yourself using one stat much more than the others, or discover that one stat never gets used at all, you may need to come up with a new stat or two.

“Gotcha!”

Problem: A choice has negative consequences, either immediate or delayed, that the player can't possibly anticipate. (For example: You're given a choice of three objects to take from the royal treasury – a wand, a scroll, and a crown – with no other information given about them. You choose the crown. At the end of the game, you discover that the wand is the only way to defeat the dragon. You don't have it, so the dragon eats you.)

Solution: Always make sure that the player has enough information to make an educated choice, and that there aren't too many hidden rewards or penalties for making specific choices.

No Way Out:

Problem: Regardless of what the PC does or chooses, the same result happens. This is frustrating because the player's choices don't matter.

Solution: Avoid the temptation to set up a dramatic scenario where the PC fights back from the brink of defeat by writing a story where it's certain that the PC will be defeated! We always want our players' choices to matter.

Repeated Choices:

Problem: Too many choices boil down to the same set of options (for instance: Do you respond angrily, diplomatically, or fearfully?) This happens when authors call on the same set of stats too often; we sometimes call it the "four-point trap" because it repeats the same four options.

Solution: If you find yourself falling into this pattern, try adding another stat or two, and/or try building choices that adjust or test two stats at once. That will help you make more varied and nuanced choices.

Building the Party:

Problem: An ensemble cast, where the player can choose the members. This introduces an unmanageable level of complexity, because you have to write every scene in multiple ways to take into account the different number and assortment of characters that might be present. For instance, we struggled with this in *Choice of the Rock Star*. Are there three, four, five, six, or seven people in the band? Are the four people a guitar, bass, singer, and keyboard? Two guitars, keyboard, and horn? Two singers, bass, keyboard? Etc. etc. etc.

Solution: If at all possible, have a fixed number of people in each scene. Trust us!