

Tools of the Table: Subplots and Fair Gaming

by T. Glenn Bane

It should go without saying that the game is about the players. Remember that a GM (Game Moderator) is not separate and apart from the Players—Bottom Line—this is very likely a group of good friends; that simple truth should never get lost for the sake of *the game*; After all, without friends, there would be no game. Sadly, there is such thing as a tyrannical GM who believes that the game is only a platform to show off their own ingenuity and to continually out-smart the players, exalting themselves while giving the players a reason to regret ever showing up to the game in the first place. Don't be one of these. Remember: The player thought long and hard about the character they were going to play, and they did so with the intent of having fun—let them. If their character grows and develops along side your plots, the game will be better for it.

I don't mean to suggest that the Players should not be challenged, a challenging game is more satisfying, but don't be afraid to let the players win. Of course, you may not be the GM who needs this advice, but I bet you have been in the game of GM who did. There are many ways to make a Player feel that they are being led by the nose and that their choices don't really matter, a few of these are: too much combat; too many death traps; no ability to adequately resolve situation; no reward for risk; no clear path to victory, or the biggest pitfall of them all, the mother of all missteps, make the characters feel they are the support group to your favorite NPC (Non-Player Character). You need to challenge the players, but don't be a table bully when you do it; they are your friends after all.

There are many aspects of a character that deserve attention, and should be allowed to develop within the story. Think of high school. There were a lot of different things on your plate, and you never completely dropped one in lieu of another, at best you just moved it to a place of momentarily lesser significance; you joined the Anime Club; you were trying to date; you wanted to fit in; you wanted people to see you as an individual; or look cool; or look unafraid; or run for Student Body President; Study dance; study martial arts; make the team; or well....you get the idea, the list can go on and on. The point is, you had many facets that all deserved your attention, and the players are no different; they created characters with more than one interest. The challenge to a good GM is incorporating all of the stories and subplots.

A trick for making the game, a *Player First Game*, without giving up plot control, is the incorporation of subplots. These are aspects that have lesser focus than the main adventure, but are no less important to the overall story.

An effective subplot should have each of these elements:

1. Give the character a goal (this goal should be completely relevant to one of the character's interest, and be in line with the sort of story the player wants told about the character.
2. Don't make it too easy; make them use their skills and ingenuity to accomplish a satisfying resolution.
3. Bring the plot to a satisfying end. This resolution should be clear, even if it only clearly details a mystery.

If this sounds similar to things you would need to construct a master plot, it is—subplots are as important. They add content to your game, for example: The barbarian Aea is moving through a twisting Labyrinth, trying to find a dimensional portal into another world (Master Plot); her hot headed boyfriend, Kullgor is likely to do something rash that might get him killed, and she wants to keep him safe, in spite of himself; the dark warlock, Agathu, is after a dagger that he believed was lost in the Labyrinth (finding it could be the eventual key to stopping him be springboard for the GM to introduce a future plot). Everything after the master plot (the portal), action/romance about boyfriend, and a dramatic/mystery about Agathu. Now, the story has more content, and is therefore more interesting. Even if the Player fails to find the portal (failing the main plot), but keeps her boyfriend alive, and uncovers the mysterious dagger, the story is still fun with plenty of avenues to keep the adventure going.

Sometime subplots can seem to be as, or more, important than the master plot. A way to keep the subplots from taking significance away from the main plot is to make sure that somehow they are dependent, or relevant to the master plot. Example, the story of Kulldor's wrecklessness is not fully realized until he is inside the Labyrinth; The dagger is lost inside the labyrinth. All of these things work together to make sure the story is taking place inside the Labyrinth. Don't drop the subplot storyline, just because the Master Plot ends. In the example of Aaea and Kullgor: perhaps Kullgor seeks to find inner peace in a monastery, to gain control over his own recklessness. Perhaps the monastery is located in a city that has a fabled merchant. Someone who can help to explain the dagger. In the adventure where they reach the city, perhaps they become involved in a plot where an Evil priest has taken over the monastery, and the merchant has been imprisoned in a dungeon, deep beneath it.

Let your stories work together, to tell the next story. Your campaign will suddenly seem fully fleshed out, with deeper meaning to the players.

In my experience when I, the GM, tries to understand the Players' vision for their characters, they have become part of the story creation process, and no one is left out. The game benefits from the community interest. So, you see, some tyrannical GMs are really only inexperienced GMs running 1 sided games.

I could write an entire segment on story-forming, or maybe I could provide some useful tools for subplots.

According to Wikipedia

In [fiction](#), a **subplot** is a secondary strand of the [plot](#) that is a supporting side story for any story or the main plot.

Subplots may connect to main plots, in either time and place or in thematic significance. Subplots often involve supporting characters, those besides the [protagonist](#) or [antagonist](#). Subplots may also intertwine with the main plot at some point in a story.

Subplots are distinguished from the main plot by taking up less of the action, having fewer significant events occur, with less impact on the "world" of the work, and occurring to less important characters.

In [screenwriting](#), a subplot is referred to as a "B story" or a "C story," etc.

Following is a link to an article that I found of particular interest and usefulness, on the matter of subplots:

<https://www.novel-writing-help.com/subplots.html>