

The road to Fortesque Island

A few years ago, I got together with some friends and we held a murder mystery party. We bought one of those off-the-shelf boxes ('Host Your Own Grisly Murder', or something like that), we invited a bunch of people, and everyone turned up in costume. And it was a miserable failure.

Don't get me wrong: we had a pleasant enough evening. Needless to say, the characters all had entertainingly silly names like Ivan Oder and Jay Walker. Dressing up was fun. Hearing our friends doing silly accents while drunk was fun. Twirling plastic moustaches and billowing capes was fun.

But as a *game*, it was entirely disappointing.

It went something like this. Before the party, we were each given a couple of sentences about our character, enough to help us choose costumes and practise an accent. On arrival, each person had a specified seat at the dinner table, and in the middle of the table was a cassette player. When we pressed play, we were treated to a rather hammed-up scripted introduction (narrated by a fellow called Sherlock McClue, if I remember rightly) explaining that a rich old lady had just been killed and one of the people around the table had committed the crime. And it was our job to find out whodunnit.

So far, so good. But in fact it was terrible. The dinner was divided into a series of 'rounds', each introduced by Sherlock McClue and timed by the playing of the cassette. Then each of us had been issued with our own private booklet which gave us instructions for each round. For instance, in round three, mine perhaps said something like, "Why don't you ask Rose Gardner what she was doing in the conservatory before dinner?", and Rose's perhaps said, "If you're asked what you were doing in the conservatory before dinner, you'd better say you were watering the plants!". The point was that everyone was supposed to ask the designated questions, listen to the answers, add in the information from their own little booklet and (alcohol-diminished attention spans permitting) draw the appropriate conclusions.

Then, after each round finished, old McClue would come back on the cassette and say something like, "So! In that last round, you found out that Mike Rotch owns a set of ornamental carving knives!", at which point we would all look at each other and mouth, "Did we?!". And the tape would then proceed to give us instructions for the next round. And so on.

By the time we reached the end of the evening, we were thoroughly bored of being told what to do by the cassette and our booklets, and we'd completely lost track of whatever plot there was supposed to be. By my recollection, one of the guests found out in the last round that he'd been the murderer all along — he simply turned over the page in his booklet and it said 'Surprise! You are the murderer!'. But to this day, I can't remember who it was, or what the plot was all about.

I do know that none of us came even close to beginning to be able to approach considering thinking about trying to start working out the answer. We just felt like we'd been innocent bystanders while the authors of the game had gone on a tortuous and incomprehensible ego trip. As I say — disappointing.

Now, as it happened, two of us at the party were professional writers, and a few nights later we found ourselves in the corner of a pub discussing our thoughts on the whole affair. Here were our conclusions:

- Good Things
 - Light-hearted, overdrawn characters
 - Fun to dress up
 - Roleplaying enjoyable
 - We were a bit too drunk by the end to really care
- Bad Things
 - Hardly any player control or participation, just reading scripts

- Incomprehensible plot leading to painful anticlimax at the end
- No incentive for character investment
- No clear sense of the evening's aims
- No opportunity to deduce what really went on — nothing like a real mystery novel
- Artificial structure — felt too much like a 'game' with 'rules' and 'rounds'
- We were a bit too drunk by the end to really care

The obvious next step was to see if we could do better. So we started to discuss a format that would preserve the Good Things while ruling out some of the Bad Things. And you've guessed it: three months later, after many ale-fuelled nights of debate and many scribblings on the backs of beer mats, we had the beginnings of an improved Murder Mystery.

Our plot, a classic Agatha Christie cliché, was the easy part. Eight suspicious characters find themselves around the dinner table of Fortesque Mansion, the only building on a remote Scottish isle. Terrible storms rage outside, cutting off the return to the mainland. The fabulously wealthy but widely disliked host, Admiral Sir Cuthbert Fortesque, has just been mysteriously stabbed in his study, and somehow his wife doesn't look that bothered. Everyone has a motive. Everyone has a few guilty secrets. Dinner is served.

In other words, our plot wasn't really very different from the out-of-the-box game that had so disappointed us. Where we wanted to differ was in the format. We wanted to give the players control over the way the evening progressed. That would solve a few problems, we reckoned: if we set guests the challenge of interacting to further their character's individual aims, they would basically feel more involved in the whole event, and the rest would fall into place.

We knew that we wanted the evening to run freely, driven by the interactions of the players. So we threw out the idea of Sherlock McClue's script-driven game and came up with a character-driven game instead. A week in advance of the party, each guest was given a detailed briefing describing their character's personality, background and particular array of guilty secrets. On the back of this sheet was a brief rundown of the other seven guests, together with fragments of information about each one ('what your character knows') and some other scraps of information. Between all eight character sheets, we were careful to scatter all the details of the plot we'd invented, and of course the murderer's character sheet was emblazoned with the warning 'YOU ARE THE MURDERER — keep this secret!'.

This approach wasn't without its challenges. As I say, we were desperate to get away from the idea of a script, but in giving up the script we were also giving up any direct control over the evening. Essentially, our guests were just being told to get together and roleplay. We were confident that, with a bit of wine to hand, they'd enjoy it — that was one of the lessons we'd learned from the original evening. But how would they disentangle our plot and work out whodunnit? More worrying still, how would the plot even get out into the open? We had deliberately thrown away the script. Could we be sure that the information we'd carefully scattered across all eight character sheets would actually get aired?

We realised that our model was based on one simple assumption: that the guests would be willing to talk about all the stuff we'd put on their character sheets. And our biggest worry would be that everyone would decide to keep their information to themselves. After all, if you're roleplaying a character with a dark past and plenty to hide, a rational policy would seem to be 'hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil'. But that way, the evening would become nothing more than idle roleplaying chit-chat. The last thing we wanted was to gleefully reveal the intricacies of our plot at the end of the evening and have everyone say, 'Well, nobody mentioned that!'.

So we went through a great deal of agonising about how to encourage characters to bargain and share information. One part of our solution was to dangle a few motivational carrots on the character sheets — "I wonder if there's another guest who might find this information useful in exchange for a share of the inheritance?" — but the main stick we invented to encourage openness was by introducing a bona fide game mechanic: Aims (with a capital A). The idea here was to give each character a distinct set of secret objectives. At the start of the party, each guest was handed a card with three Aims on it which related to their character's background and elements of the plot. The first Aim in most cases was 'Find out who killed Sir Cuthbert!' — my co-writer was rightly insistent that this should be the central theme of the evening — but the list also included assorted things like 'Find out who's been blackmailing you!', 'Identify the double-agent and pass on the secret code to them!', and

'Expose your step-daughter as a prostitute!'. One notable exception was the murderer, who got just one aim: 'Don't get discovered!'.

Now, we put together the Aims in such a way that some characters had conflicting objectives while others were mutually supportive. We hoped that guests would spend the evening trying to identify which other guests could help them by providing useful information or exchanging promises. Players would be guarded in what they said, of course, but not too guarded: they would need to get others to trust them even while they tried to protect their own secrets. Of course, they were also explicitly encouraged to blab, plot, connive, lie, threaten, strike deals, betray each other or resort to pretty much any other roleplaying tactics in order to further their own Aims — the golden rule we gave them was 'Do whatever you think your character would do!'. At the end of the evening, the guests who'd achieved all their Aims would be declared the winners — and for good measure, we decreed that whoever got fingered as the murderer in a final group vote would automatically lose as they were carted off to the gallows, even if they were innocent.

We also carefully made sure that there were no guilty secrets on anyone's character sheet which weren't at least hinted at in someone else's briefing. This was another mechanism we hoped would force information out into the open. You may believe your torrid affair with the maid to be a well-kept secret, but when it becomes clear that someone else saw you sneaking into her bedroom at 2am, you'd better be prepared to strike a shady deal to keep your reputation intact. Whom do you need to convince to keep his mouth shut? And what information can you offer him to swing negotiations in your favour?

So the end result of six months of planning was a brand-new format that we hoped would avoid the stilted disappointment of our commercially-bought game. We had a clear idea how we wanted the evening to go and we had identified what bits of information needed to swapped between players in order to give the group a good shot at cracking the mystery. But we were acutely aware that our new model was fragile, dependent on a lot of things: the willingness of players to invest time learning about their characters before the party; the right balance in the group between caution and openness; the inclination of each person to expend mental energy collecting and assembling the pieces of the puzzle, rather than, say, giving up and getting drunk; and of course the thoroughness of our game planning in giving the right information to the right characters.

How did it go? Well, it was enormous fun for us, as writers, to watch our friends play out our months of planning (we cast ourselves as non-speaking waiters so we could take part too). It was a particular delight to see them spotting important elements of the story and then coming up with their own schemes to try and fill in the gaps before anyone else did. But the most rewarding outcome of all was the many hours we all spent over the following days and weeks, discussing how the evening had gone, arguing about the tactics that everyone had used, and discussing what they should have done differently.¹ In short, the plot worked and the guests loved it. Bingo!

But then there was another epiphany. During the planning stages, the structure of the game and the plot of the story had been pretty entangled in our minds. It was only after our friends had played out the evening that we realised the two halves were separable. We could take the basic format we'd invented — information scattered across character sheets, supported by a matrix of mutually conflicting and reinforcing aims — and plug in any story we liked. And the feedback from 'Fortesque', as it became known, had been so positive that that's exactly what we did.

Using the same format, we wrote two more plots over the next couple of years. The second was set in colonial times, populated by caricature pirates, slave queens and ruthless British dictators, and it took us the best part of a year to write since we were keen to keep a step ahead of our savvy friends by introducing new tricks and plot twists. The third was a return to classic themes with a curse-of-the-Pharaoh plot, Nazis, ghosts and in-game assassinations, and was probably our strongest offering so far. And, although my co-writer and I are now living hundreds of miles apart, we're very slowly putting together a fourth plot set in 1930s Chicago, complete with a cast of gangsters, bent cops and vigilantes, a rigged poker game and — of course — The Godfather himself. Watch this space.

¹ This isn't quite true. With hindsight, the most rewarding outcome of all was the fact that two friends we cast as illicit lovers on that first evening actually became a couple as a result... and they're getting married next year. I'm not sure how long we can go on taking the credit for that, though.

Meanwhile, Fortesque has been repeated four or five times with other groups of players, successfully and with virtually no tweaks to our original format. We keep being told that we should think about publishing that one, and although I have my doubts about the practicalities it's something we're considering.

The bad news? I'm ashamed to admit that I've become a bit of a snob about murder mystery parties. When the topic comes up in conversation with new groups of friends, I tend to look away and talk about something else. Frankly, the thought of spending a hastily-organised evening wearing a plastic moustache, reading through a script and smiling at an over-camped cassette seems faintly horrific. After all, I want to point out, all you need to do it *properly* is a group of eight dedicated friends, a set of theatre-quality costumes, two bored professional writers and a year of free time...