BUILDING A BETTER FREEFORM

Compilation Thread

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*This is a compilation of a series of posts made to
the aus.games.roleplay newsgroup on methods for improving the writing of
freeforms - mostly in the vein of the interactive drama or theatre style.*

Author: hobbes
Email: hobbes@labyrinth.net.au
Date: 1998/10/11
Forums: aus.games.roleplay

Okay

Well I have many questions and ideas, but would really like to hear what others think.

First off all, I like to say that I've only been roleplaying and writing for a few years. I've
played a fair number over the past few years and I've written one freeform for a convention -
it was a Muppets freeform at Conquest this year. It seemed to run smoothly and was well
recieved. ie - the players enjoyed it.

Which I guess is the main point to the freeform - if the players enjoyed it, then it was a
success.

Which means the first question has arrived - what percentage of the players has to enjoy a
freeform to make it a good freeform? If you have a game where most of the players enjoyed
in and some didn't, is it still a success?

1. Game Size

Okay - my personal beliefs here - I'm yet to play an excellent freeform that has over 20 players.

I believe that this is because the more palyers you get the harder and more involved it gets to have something for everyone to do. You also have the worry of not being able to fill sessions - so you have characters that are able to be dropped if you dont have enough players. The larger the freeform is the easier it is to fall apart.

What's the ideal size for a freeform? What is too large?

2. Extranous Characters

Characters that don't have enough plots to keep them busy, characters whose enjoyment of the game is dependant on another character or are directly under the control of another character. Characters thhat are there only because they are needed by another character. Characters that are written in as 'filler' and there fore are poorly thought out and have no real reason to be there and no importance to the plot.

3. Main Characters and Lesser Characters

This is a tricky one. Some people say that you should not have major characters and lesser characters in a freeform -every character should be equally important. However this is an ideal and pretty difficult to make so. I'm interested in anyone who can tell me a good way of doing this.

Espicially in genre based freeforms you are going to have characters that are more important than others. And by saying that you cant have 'main' characters you are limiting your options with freeforms. I realise that the trick is to balance the characters and make sure everyone has enough plot to keep them busy - maybe give main character a few things to do and secondary characters lots more to keep them busy.

4. Genre based freeforms

Now the biggest problem I've found with genre based freeforms is that players who aren't familar with the genre are at a dissadvantage, and people who really like the genre will get upset if it doesn't match their veiws of the genre. Also in most genre (especially those based around tv shows) you very definately have that problem of crucial main characters.

Anyone have any ideas on how to work around this?

5. Players not Showing up

I don't think I've played a freeform at a con yet where at least one player didn't show up. This seems to be a chronic problem. Whether its players not showing up, or not getting enough registrations in the first place, it always happens. How do you write in a character that can be dropped? But is also essential to the plot..... *scratches head* this is the part were i really have no idea. With my game I got lucky and managed to round up a full complement of ring ins.

6. Not enough plot.

Biggest problem - I guess this is where it comes down to well written freeforms and badly written freeforms. I've been in to many games where i have been bored shitless for most of the game. If the gm isn't going to give you enough plot, they should at least give you plenty of characterisation info/backgound so you can have fun that way

7. A list of other characters in the game.

An absolute must for any freeform - unless of course the characters have never met and never even heard of each other before. Freeforms are arkward enough without spending half the game trying to figure out who everyone is. Name tags are also a must. If the characters know each other, even by reputation they need to be given some info.

8. Good and Bad Roleplayers

This is the point i'm concerned about making - specially given the recent posts on bng's and trophies.

I dont want to use the words good and bad roleplayers. Maybe it could be Extroverts and less confident rpgers. But reguardless of how we pc the phrase, we are all familar with the problems. You will always have the louder, more extreme players who get noticed. You will also always have the players who can play a role averagely, good or supurbly, and we all know that strength of players in various roles definatley effects the running of the game - especially in political games.

In a five player game if the player playing the team leader isn't acting like one, the team can still act like he is. However in freeforms the players personalilty is what comes to the fore.

How can ppl balence the game and write characters that it doesn't matter if they are played by any stardard of player?

Okay - thats a start - I'm sure that others can add to this list, its only intended as a starting point. I apologise for the rambling nature of my points and i hope they make Sense.

When I originally decided to design a freeform for a convention I made a point of gming freeforms for other designers for experience and asking lots of experienced freeform designers for advice. I was very lucky and got given alot of advice and assistence and i will always be greatful for any useful advice and feedback that i get. There is a great deal of talent out there and it should be utilised. Not just for designing but also to be the voice of experience for newer designers. Never be too proud to ask.

Re: Building a better freeform (Daniel Wilks posting from Daves account)
Author: David S. Gove
Email: dgove@tig.com.au
Date: 1998/10/12
Forums: aus.games.roleplay

hobbes wrote:

Okay Well I have many questions and ideas, but would really like to hear what others think. First off all, I like to say that I've only been roleplaying and writing for a few years. I've played a fair number over the past few years and I've written one freeform for a convention - it was a Muppets freeform at Conquest this year. It seemed to run smoothly and was well recieved. ie - the players enjoyed it. Which I guess is the main point to the freeform - if the players enjoyed it, then it was a success.

Amen to that.

Which means the first question has arrived - what percentage of the players has to enjoy a freeform to make it a good freeform? If you have a game where most of the players enjoyed in and some didn't, is it still a success?

1. Game Size

Okay - my personal beliefs here - I'm yet to play an excellent freeform that has over 20 players.

I believe that this is because the more palyers you get the harder and more involved it gets to have something for everyone to do. You also have the worry of not being able to fill sessions - so you have characters that are able to be dropped if you dont have enough players. The larger the freeform is the easier it is to fall apart.

What's the ideal size for a freeform? What is too large?

IMHO, it really depends on the kind of game. I find that it's better to do your character templates and then work out the number by snipping or adding i.e i have 26 characters, but this one seems a tad on the boring side so I'll trim him and make it a 25 player game.

2. Extranous Characters

Characters that don't have enough plots to keep them busy, characters whose enjoyment of the game is dependant on another character or are directly under the control of another character. Characters thhat are there only because they are needed by another character. Characters that are written in as 'filler' and there fore are poorly thought out and have no real reason to be there and no importance to the plot.

I try to have at least one major plot for every 5 characters, and at least 2 minor plots each.

3. Main Characters and Lesser Characters

This is a tricky one. Some people say that you should not have major characters and lesser characters in a freeform -every character should be equally important. However this is an ideal and pretty difficult to make so. I'm interested in anyone who can tell me a good way of doing this.

Espicially in genre based freeforms you are going to have characters that are more important than others. And by saying that you cant have 'main' characters you are limiting your options with freeforms. I realise that the trick is to balance the characters and make sure everyone has enough plot to keep them busy - maybe give main character a few things to do and secondary characters lots more to keep them busy.

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Anyone have any ideas on how to work around this?

Background info!!! I wrote a Wildcards freeform a few years back, that by all accounts seemed to work, I credit that to background info, and the fact that I chose to only run once.

Each character was given character background, but also a pretty extensive rundown of the world up till then (up to about ten pages in some cases...sorry for putting you guys who played through that }:))

5. Players not Showing up

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have no idea. With my game I got lucky and managed to round up a full complement of ring ins.

Always a problem. I usually try to work around this by

Having "too many" plots

Making up new plot threads on the run (my GM's can attest to this, I'm kinda evil to work with because I constantly re-write new plots on the run. I like for people to have fun)

6. Not enough plot.

Biggest problem - I guess this is where it comes down to well written freeforms and badly written freeforms. I've been in to many games where i have been bored shitless for most of the game. If the gm isn't going to give you enough plot, they should at least give you plenty of characterisation info/backgound so you can have fun that way

Like I say, give them plot till it runs out their ears, it's better if they can't keep up than if they run out IMHO.

7. A list of other characters in the game.

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Not necessarily...depends on the game. I agree that you need tags if all the characters know each other, but sometimes it can really work to have a bunch of people in a room with no idea who people are.

8. Good and Bad Roleplayers

This is the point i'm concerned about making - specially given the recent posts on bng's and trophies. I dont want to use the words good and bad roleplayers. Maybe it could be Extroverts and less confident rpgers. But reguardless of how we pc the phrase, we are all familar with the problems. You will always have the louder, more extreme players who get noticed. You will also always have the players who can play a role averagely, good or supurbly, and we all know that strength of players in various roles definatley effects the running of the game - especially in political games.

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How can ppl balence the game and write characters that it doesn't matter if they are played by any stardard of player?

Can't help with this one, no firm ideas. Apart from the revise and re-write on the run to tailor the game to the players.

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When I originally decided to design a freeform for a convention I made a point of gming freeforms for other designers for experience and asking lots of experienced freeform designers for advice. I was very lucky and got given alot of advice and assistence and i will always be greatful for any useful advice and feedback that i get. There is a great deal of talent out there and it should be utilised. Not just for designing but also to be the voice of experience for newer designers. Never be too proud to ask.

Once again AMEN!!!

I stress that all of this is my own opinion.

Daniel Wilks (Posting from Dave Goves account)

Author: chris/reman
Email: z2172268@student.unsw.edu.au
Date: 1998/10/12
Forums: aus.games.roleplay

hobbes wrote:

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Well I have helped write a freeform and I have played in 2 and GM'd 2, so I am not saying I am the bees knees, but I live with them, Philippa, Craig and especially James (whom I don't live with but may as well :)

Which I guess is the main point to the freeform - if the players enjoyed it, then it was a success.

Indeed.

1. Game Size

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To be perfectly honest, when I was GMing a 20 player freeform, the dynamics were so much harder to get going, as opposed to 50+ player freeforms. Sure it is easier for it to fall apart, but it is also easier for players to amuse themselves by 1. starting their own plots, this is something GM's really appreciate, as long as it doesn't wreck the freeform, cause it makes it (that game) more interesting and you feel good that people have gotten into their characters enough that they don't need a GM leading them by the nose. 2. If someone else is playing whom you dislike you can get a character that won't have to even go near them or conversely you can walk up to someone whom you don't even know and introduce yourself (good way to pick up :P).

I am not sure though which is better; a 20 player freeform that runs 3 sessions or a 60 player freeform that runs 1 session...hmmm

What's the ideal size for a freeform? What is too large?

I would say over 100 players is getting unwieldy, though rob did run a 100 player egypt, successfully according to sources?? hmm maybe someone would be brave (or stupid) enough to run a 200 player freeform *gasp*

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I agree, extraneous characters are a sign of a poorly designed freeform, if someone is just a guard for a noble, and is just attached to their plots then thats boring, however if they are a part of a group of guards with their own plots, or they are the subject of a betrayal (or bribe, or 'in the line of fire') plot then there is a difference.

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I think it depends on what you mean by main and lesser...surely if you have a King, he is a main character, but then again it could be a weak king, which relegates him to a lesser character...it is a tricky line to follow...all i can say that if you do this usually it is prudent to cast people who you know will succeed in those roles and not be too over the top.

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Copious amounts of background notes, which no one reads anyway :(, anyhting above 4 pages for a character sheet means only the most motivated person will slog through, but if they do the rewards are great..maybe it could be a problem with some roleplayers (I don't want to generalise as I am sure there are some out there who would love 10 page character sheets to immerse themselves in.

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This is a player problem.

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I agree, although there is such thing as too many plots...which can be as equally disastrous. A player can be pulled in so many directions that they can't get any done.

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Thats okay, they mostly made sense, i hope mine didnt ramble too much either.

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In fact pleeeease ask to GM, there is never enough freeform GM's and it's not that hard...

regards, chris
Christopher Day
E-Mail the_reman@hotmail.com
Homepage http://www.geocities.com/TimesSquare/Lair/1218

Author: Fiona MacTavish (Phil Wallach)
Email: fionamac@nsw.bigpond.net.au
Date: 1998/10/15
Forums: aus.games.roleplay

>PLEASE NOTE that this is not Fiona but Phil Wallach sullying Fiona's beautiful account with my bad bad name (or so I like to think!) [Just be thankful it _isn't_ Fiona]

chris/reman wrote in message

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Kome was run in Canberra in 1984 and The Roost in 1985 ... both were about 189 players I think. Both freeforms were all day every day for three days .... it was an amazing experience.

Author: mdick
Email: mdick@insect.sd.monash.edu.au
Date: 1998/10/16
Forums: aus.games.roleplay

In article <704o23pnc1@m2.c3.telstra-mm.net.au>, "Fiona MacTavish" wrote:

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My memories are that Kome had over 250 players and the Roost about 180. Both were lots of fun, but lacked in the area of a cohesive storyline. In my opinion, a freeform that size renders it near impossible to have a cohesive storyline.

Martin

Author: Chaos Cat
Email: Razorgirl@Hotmail.com
Date: 1998/10/21
Forums: aus.games.roleplay

Ave!

I am new to the "writting freeforms scene", but thought I would add my thoughts to the discussion. I would like to add that it is really great to see constructive postings on AGR. Congratulations to all who have posted.

the players enjoyed it.

[chomp]

Which I guess is the main point to the freeform - if the players enjoyed it, then it was a success.

I have enjoyed freeforms (hey I've enjoyed games in general) that others have hated. Where people have complained on a pourly written/"I didn't have anything to do" senarios, I have had lots of fun, crowbared my into having something to do, found new things to do, and/or thrown myself into the character. Maybe this is because I am new to cons and have therefore seen less freeforms/modules and am looking at each game with new eyes. I haven't seen the beautiful masterpieces that others rave on about so (for want of a better term) I am "easy to please".

So far, I am taking it as a given that people have enjoyed my games. I haven't heard anything bad about them that wasn't constructive (ie. Hey have you thought about doing this?)... But that may be due to _who_ I had playing in them.

1. Game Size

Okay - my personal beliefs here - I'm yet to play an excellent freeform that has over 20 players.

What makes an excellent game for you? I know parts of that may be covered in the passages that follow, but in a nut shell, what do you look for?

I believe that this is because the more palyers you get the harder and more involved it gets to have something for everyone to do.

[chomp]

To be perfectly honest, when I was GMing a 20 player freeform, the dynamics were so much harder to get going, as opposed to 50+ player freeforms. Sure it is easier for it to fall apart, but it is also easier for players to amuse themselves

I'm still new to writting so I can't really comment on this except from a player's perspective. For me roleplaying is about telling the story of a character, their life, who they are, what happens to theem, how they overcome them. This is harder to grasp hold of when there are lots of characters around. ie.You can concentrate on your own character, but don't get to see the beauty of the others in the game. It's also really irritating when you ahve to form a que to speak to a character because 20 other playeers also want to speak to them as well.

If someone else is playing whom you dislike you can get a character that won't have to even go near them

I have yet to see this work. I have had three GMs promise me this, each game I ahve had events happen that have thrust us together. We end up playing it through, but I doubt either of us are happy, or comfortable about the situation. And for me, personal comfort when playing has become a _big_ issue.

or conversely you can walk up to someone whom you don't even know and introduce yourself (good way to pick up :P).

Meeting people, yes. Picking up? I ahve said it before and I will say it again: "Cons are a _bad_ place to pick up!"

I am not sure though which is better; a 20 player freeform that runs 3 sessions or a 60 player freeform that runs 1 session...hmmm

What about freeforms that run over one session?

I have only played one "two session" game at a con, it was a freeform. I will only play one session gams from now on unless the designer can _really_ inspire me to give their game a chance.

What's the ideal size for a freeform? What is too large?

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Are we talking at a con only, or out side of a con as well?

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I agree, extraneous characters are a sign of a poorly designed freeform, if someone is just a guard for a noble, and is just attached to their plots then thats boring, however if they are a part of a group of guards with their own plots, or they are the subject of a betrayal (or bribe, or 'in the line of fire') plot then there is a difference.

Yay!

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I think it depends on what you mean by main and lesser...surely if you have a King, he is a main character, but then again it could be a weak king, which relegates him to a lesser character...it is a tricky line to follow...all i can say that if you do this usually it is prudent to cast people who you know will succeed in those roles and not be too over the top.

Casting (for me) is important. I like to think that in my game each and every character is important (which is why when players don't show it really jerks my chain), and it is equally important to find a player who will enjoy playing the role. If I have a "King" I make sure that there are other that he must listen to. That he has to acknowlege the "little people" and see each of them as being important. If the king puts himself above the other characters, or (I and as a player, I _REALLY_ hate it when this happens in a game) separates himself from the game, shutting himself in a little box and only speaking to characters who are "important" enough to be "graced with his presence". He will not be a successful ruler and the "little folk" will rise up against him.

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Not me. I hate having to read a short novel just to understand the game/ know my character.

I find verbally briefing the players on genre/world far better. It means that you know they have the information and (more importantly for me) the feel of what the game is about.

5. Players not Showing up

[grumble, grumble, snarl, snarl]

6. Not enough plot.

[chomp]

I agree, although there is such thing as too many plots...which can be as equally disastrous.

I've found that having the plots have an order of priority works well for players getting things done, as opposed to (as was said) "being pulled in many dirrections and thus not getting any of them completed"

7. A list of other characters in the game.

An absolute must for any freeform - unless of course the characters have never met and never even heard of each other before. Freeforms are arkward enough without spending half the game trying to figure out who everyone is.

Again I hate reading copious amounts of notes and find that even if you are given "views of other characters" you sttill have to find which player is playing who.

As a player, I prefer a verbal briefing, "everyone stand in a circle as the GM anounces who you are and what makes you important". It also gives players a visual image to associate with

and thus remember more easely (as opposed to flicking through a character sheet thinking "what do I know about/ think of this person")

Name tags are also a must. If the characters know each other, even by reputation they need to be given some info.

Is a great help to players, though I have seen it work well without.

Name tags are good, however in an above 20 character freeform doing the who you know in the writing stage can take forever, ie over 1 month solid writing to do this, without resorting to pro forma cut-n-paste (even this method can take forever)

I gave players a list of steriotypical oppinions of other characters (ie. If you where to stop someone in the middle of a corridore and ask "what's that person like", this is the basic response you would get. If the character is clearly defined, the player should be able to work out if he likes them or not, and add on his own prejudges or shineing ideals.

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Thats okay, they mostly made sense, i hope mine didnt ramble too much either.

"ditto"

Cheers!

Chaos Cat