

*"There are many worlds beyond the world you know," the old man said as he pulled down an enormous, dusty tome with his mechanical hand. "This is just one of millions stretched out across the cosmos, each with its own gods and its own peoples, each with its own dangers."*

*"I would see them all," Brand said boldly. Then, at the old man's raised eyebrow, he amended, "or as many as I can."*

*The old man nodded, almost smiling. "There are paths through the universe, paths dangerous and dark. Some are forbidden. But they are there." He opened the book. Secreted within its hollowed-out pages were three shining silver tools: A compass, sextant, and astrolabe. They rested on a map of constellations that Brand did not recognize. "Before you leave, you will need to know where you are going. These will help you find your way."*

## YOUR GAME

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Because *Forthright Open Roleplay* is not tied to any specific story or setting, the first step in playing *Forthright* is to determine how your gaming group will play. Will you be playing a single-session game at a gaming convention, a short series of sessions in a local game store, or a long-running campaign at home? The steps outlined in this chapter will help you identify the setting and story for your game, as well as the topics you would like to cover and how everyone playing the game is expected to behave during the game.

Game creation is an opportunity to get to know your fellow players. It is also an opportunity to share your own expectations for the game, and learn the expectations of the other players. Expectations are shared and set before play begins in order to provide the best gaming experience for every player involved. If one player wants to play a villain, and another player wants to play a champion of righteousness, sorting that out before play begins is necessary for smooth play. In this case, one player may choose to alter his or her expectations, or both players can agree that their characters may likely experience dramatic friction without that friction being necessarily *interpersonal* friction.

Setting expectations early can also help players determine if they would like to continue participating in the game being played by a particular group. *Not* playing a game can often be more rewarding than playing an unsatisfactory game. Games can be unsatisfactory for many reasons – you can't commit to the amount of time required, the world or story doesn't interest you, you are not comfortable with the subject material or your fellow gamers. Game creation covers topics that help players decide very quickly if a particular group or game is a good fit for them.

## SESSION ZERO

The default method of game creation in *Forthright Open Roleplay* is for the Guide and Players to sit down and discuss the game together during their first get-together. This is called Session Zero because it takes place prior to the beginning of roleplay and acts as a prelude to the game that will be played. Session Zero is designed to follow three major steps:

1. Create the Game Charter by defining the expectations of the Guide and Players.
2. Define the Fellowship by selecting a special ability that the Players will share.
3. Create the Player Characters that the Players will be playing throughout the game.

Players do not need to come to Session Zero fully prepared with a character concept, nor does a Guide need to have a fully prepared campaign or story ready for play. In fact, it is more helpful if Players and Guide do not come so prepared, because firmer concepts are less flexible and make collaboration harder. Working together to create the game allows everyone at the table to have some stake and feel like a true participant in crafting the story. It is also an excellent preview of how well the gaming group will be able to work together throughout the game that will be played.



The Safety Tier governs the level of potentially objectionable content that is appropriate for the game. Four options exist for the Safety Tier, each escalating the potentially objectionable material available in the game:

- **Kid-Safe:** Cartoon violence containing no blood or death, no sexual situations, no drug use and no profanity are acceptable. This is equivalent to a G or PG movie.
- **Teen-Safe:** Mild violence containing no explicit gore, mild sexual references, references to drug use, and mild profanity are acceptable. This is equivalent to a PG or PG-13 movie.
- **Adult-Safe:** Violence featuring blood and death, mild sexual situations, drug use, and profanity are acceptable. This is equivalent to an R-rated movie.
- **Unsafe:** Extreme violence and gore, sexual situations, heavy drug use and other triggers to traumatic events are acceptable. This is equivalent to an NC-17 movie.

Because every gaming group has a different threshold and tolerance for potentially objectionable material, these four options are the beginning, not the end, of defining what is or is not appropriate for the group as a whole. The group should discuss which Safety Tier everyone is most interested in experiencing and come to a consensus. The Safety Tiers can further be modified by the Do and Don't section.

## DO AND DON'T

The *Do and Don't* section allows the Safety Tier to be modified by specific rules. For example, if a group is interested in a Teen-Safe game but doesn't care to restrict profanity, that group could add "Swear all you want" to the *Do* section. The rules recorded in this section are generally out-of-game, real-life behaviors, though they can cover material relevant in-game. These sections should contain concrete behaviors, such as "Don't use racist slurs," and not more abstract behaviors such as "Don't be a jerk." This helps everyone clearly understand what is acceptable and what is not.

The *Do* section contains behaviors the gaming group as a whole would like to promote. Like the Safety Tier, the group should discuss the *Do* section and come to a consensus about what is appropriate. More items can be added to the *Do* section at any time when the group agrees to do so. Some common *Do's* are:

- Arrive on time or call / text someone in the game group beforehand if you can't
- Chip in for the food you eat
- Take notes about the Gamescape
- Bring your own beverage

The *Don't* section identifies behaviors both out-of-game and in-game which the Players or Guide are explicitly saying make them uncomfortable or which they find disrespectful. This section is *one vote out*, not *majority rule*: if a single roleplayer wants something in the *Don't* section, it goes in the *Don't* section. That roleplayer is free to discuss his or her rationale, but is not obligated to do so. The *Don't* rules are not to be balked at or ignored, nor is the person who declared a *Don't* to be harassed as a result. More items can be added to the *Don't* section at any time, by anyone, without need for explanation. Some common *Don'ts* are:

- Use mobile devices at the table
- Discuss real-life politics
- Use rape or child abuse as a plot device
- Make racist, homophobic or misogynistic jokes

## TIME, FREQUENCY AND LOCATION

These three items should be relatively non-controversial, and apply largely to games which will run multiple sessions. These identify the time and day the group will meet, how often the group will meet, and where the group will meet. Sometimes, one or two roleplayers will have a dramatically different schedule than other roleplayers; this is an opportunity for the group as a whole to determine the best timing for their game. This is chosen last in the social rules because the Safety Tier and Do's and Don'ts may have reduced the number of roleplayers involved in Session Zero.

## ENFORCING THE SOCIAL RULES

The Guide must take the lead in enforcing the Social Rules, as Guides are viewed by many Players as the chief authority in the gaming group. However, *all* roleplayers are responsible for maintaining civility and respect at the gaming table. When the Social Rules are violated, the other members of the gaming group should immediately raise complaint and identify the unacceptable behavior. If the violation was unintentional, the violator can apologize and no more need be made of the situation.

Intentional or repeated violations, though, may indicate a roleplayer who does not understand or respect the Social Rules as laid out. The members of the gaming group can choose to explain why this continued behavior is unacceptable, or they can request that the violator leave the gaming group. Alternately, if you find that you are the only roleplayer who is making complaints or violations, you may want to reconsider whether you are in a gaming group which aligns with your interests.

When enforcing the Social Rules, the Guide must not mete punishment to violators via the Gamescape. Behaviors inside and outside the game are to be handled separately.

## HOUSE RULES

The largest section of the Game Charter is reserved for House Rules. House Rules allow Players and Guides who are already familiar with *Forthright Open Roleplay* to modify the ruleset as they prefer. House Rules can add new rules to expand play, or remove existing rules that are disliked. House Rules should be decided after thorough discussion by the gaming group. More House Rules can be added once play begins after discussion by the group. Any rules developed through an Appeal to the Table should also be recorded here. House Rules should be added through the consensus of the gaming group as a whole.

## THE GAME PLAN

Once the Rules that will be used in the game are worked out, the gaming group can determine the Gamescape in which they would like to play. This Game Plan will identify the game's world, any running themes, the scope and the level of magic in the game world. The Guide takes the lead here, as the Gamescape is the Guide's dominion and the Guide must be prepared and ready to comfortably run the game in order to provide the best possible experience for everyone at the table. The Guide will outline a proposal containing the following sections:

## GAME SETTING

The Setting of a game is more than just the world in which it takes place; it encompasses the areas available for play, the Species that populate those regions, the various NPCs that inhabit the area and the outstanding conflicts that they face. The Setting is summarized by the Guide during this section of Session Zero by identifying the following aspects:

- **Region:** The area in which the game will occur, including any major towns or cities and the culture that Players can expect to find there. An overland map can be helpful in showing Players how the region intersects the world at large. Photos or drawings should be used to help give the Players a sense of place.

- **Species:** The Species that inhabit the region, or that are otherwise available for play by the Players. The Guide should use this opportunity to identify the cultures and behaviors of the various Species, and how the Species interact with each other in the Setting.
- **Power Groups:** The major centers of power in the Setting and who controls those centers. Major organizations or NPCs should also be described, as well as people and groups that the PCs might interact with. The interplay between these power groups, and whether the PCs would be aware of them, should also be identified.
- **Points of Conflict:** The major and minor issues the region and its people face, and which may shape the PCs' adventure whether they like it or not. The sources of this conflict and the results of it so far on the Gamescape should be identified, as well as how the people most affected are trying to deal with the situation.
- **History:** The major and minor events which have helped to shape the region and its people. The history of the Setting is the story of the Setting, and helps to put the power centers and points of conflict into perspective. The importance of history is different from group to group and adventure to adventure.
- **Unusual Characteristics:** Anything that is strange, interesting or unusual that the Players may find engaging or which helps to define the uniqueness of the Setting. These can be as simple as geographical formations or as complex as a cosmology or web of international intrigue. If it hasn't been mentioned, and it's cool, mention it!

The Guide leads this discussion of the Setting, but Players should ask whatever questions come to mind. They should also identify for the Guide which aspects of the Setting most deeply interest them; they can later use these aspects themselves by incorporating them into their character designs. The Players can also help to shape the Setting by asking for certain aspects to be placed into the Setting, such as a fallen kingdom or a treacherous noble house.

The Setting can be a world of the Guide's own design, or it could be a purchased product that the Guide adapts. When the Guide adapts an existing Setting, the Setting becomes something new, belonging to the group; if new information is published regarding the Setting, it is the Guide's choice whether to incorporate that new information into the Setting as it exists for the group.

The Setting is further modified by the Themes, Scope, Spin and Magic Level decided upon collectively by the group. In this way the Players and Guide collaborate to shape the Setting as the Guide sees it into something that all of the roleplayers in the gaming group have some ownership of. After Session Zero, the Setting is the sole purview of the Guide, using the Game Plan to shape the events the Players encounter and initiate into a cohesive story.

## GAME THEME

A Game's Theme identifies the type of play that will be the focus of the game. Games can have multiple themes; when this is the case, the Themes should be listed in their order of prominence. In order to help the Guide and Players select a Theme or Themes, some examples are listed here. This is not a comprehensive list, and you should feel free to add more to this list if you have an idea that does not fit one of these Themes.

- **Arena:** The game focuses on gladiatorial combat. The Player Characters could be gladiators themselves, either as slaves or willing combatants, or owners of a gladiatorial team fighting for victory in tournaments.
- **Criminal:** The Player Characters are either criminals or constantly suffering from or having to fight off criminal activity. These games typically take place in cities large enough to support major trade.
- **Dungeon Crawl:** The game focuses on delving into ancient ruins or monster-infested lairs, defeating the enemies therein, and looting their remains. A combat-based gaming classic.
- **Empire-Building:** The game focuses on gathering power by building or capturing organizations or strongholds and defending them against all comers.

- **Establishment:** The Player Characters are, or work for, the lawful authorities in the area. Maintaining order and the status quo without violence is a major focus of these types of games.
- **Exodus:** The Player Characters are refugees, either from some natural disaster or political machinations, and must travel across the landscape in search of a new home.
- **Exploration:** The game focuses on exploring the world and encountering various and different people, creatures, and places. This can also focus on discovering the past and ancient civilizations.
- **Horror:** The game focuses on unsettling the Players and their characters. This works best when the characters cannot simply fight off the horrors they are facing; being empowered reduces terror.
- **Hunted:** The Player Characters are being hunted by an individual or group. They could be escaped prisoners, know forbidden secrets, or have crossed an ancient and powerful enemy.
- **Hunting:** The Player Characters are hunting a character or group. The hunted individual or individuals could be wanted criminals, have a dangerous bloodline, possess a needed artifact, or any number of other reasons.
- **Intrigue:** The game focuses on politics, diplomacy, treachery and simmering tensions. Talking is the main form of conflict; combat in such games often counts as a failure.
- **Invasion:** The Player Characters' homeland has been invaded, or they are invading someone else's homeland. Their opponents might be monsters, or friends and neighbors collaborating with the enemy.
- **Military:** The Player Characters are members of a military unit of some kind. They have responsibilities and can be commanded by higher-ranking officers. Fighting is a major focus of such games.
- **Mystery:** The game focuses on a single huge mystery or a series of smaller mysteries that the Player Characters must try to resolve. These games focus on Players' problem-solving abilities and tend to have little combat.
- **Pirate:** The game focuses on piracy – on the high seas, on the highways, or in the skies. The PCs might be pirates or pirate hunters, or be caught between the two and suffering from both.
- **Questapalooza:** The Player Characters travel from place to place, being presented with quests by the NPCs they encounter. These quests typically require combinations of combat, cleverness and conversation.
- **Rebellion:** The Player Characters are rebels fighting against a strong authority. This can be a rightful or unjust authority; the PCs can be criminals or heroes.
- **Relic Quest:** The game focuses on hunting a particular relic or a series of relics. These relics could be magical or completely mundane; either way, they are *meaningful* and somebody wants them.
- **Rescue:** The PCs have a great quest to rescue or protect someone; or prevent someone from being rescued. These games can often involve a great deal of travel and stealth.
- **Save the World:** The Setting is on the verge of destruction, be it from a great villain or a terrible disaster. The game focuses on finding a way to stop the destruction.
- **Tragedy:** The PCs are either racing toward disaster themselves, or constantly encounter tragic figures. A sense of impending doom tinges the elements of these games.
- **Wild Frontier:** The Player Characters are adventuring at the very edge of civilization, expanding the borders of the frontier and encountering the unknown but still able to retreat to the comforts of home.

The Guide and Players are encouraged to be creative in considering the Theme or Themes that will be explored. Also note that the Themes that are selected need not be the *only* Themes explored in the game. For instance, the Players might want to explore a game where the main Themes are a Military Invasion where they are invading the homeland of a neighboring country. The Guide, as the story progresses, might choose to reveal that the invasion is unjust, and that the invaders are committing moral crimes. This can potentially introduce a new Theme of Rebellion to the game, as the PCs turn against their own homeland. The PCs could, in turn, try to stop the war through political and social manipulation, adding a theme of Intrigue to the game.

The Themes selected in Session Zero can and should evolve with the story as it develops over the course of play. This helps to keep the game fresh and interesting; change is a necessary aspect of storytelling. Themes are springboards for your imagination: use them to launch your ideas, not constrain them.

## GAME SCOPE

The Scope of a Game identifies how far afield the Players will likely travel across the Setting during their adventure. In a way, this also identifies the stakes at play; characters who are adventuring in a small location are unlikely to be fighting world-spanning threats. There are four Scopes available in *Forthright Open Roleplay*:

- **Local:** Your adventures encompass a small area, such as a city or duchy, and involve threats to your immediate area. These games are played in a small area, such as a city or even a district within a city. Alternately, a rural location in the middle of nowhere or an underground dungeon, are games of Local scope.
- **National:** Your adventures encompass a large area and involve the movement of nations. These games are played in a larger region, bounded by political borders or clusters of nations. These games can range across several hundred miles and can involve major threats to civilization.
- **Global:** Your adventures encompass the entire world, and you may need to travel across most of it in order to achieve your goals. These games are played across the surface of the world, ranging from continent to continent. Threats to the entire world, or finding the scattered remnants of lost civilizations, are games of Global scope.
- **Universal:** Your adventures take you beyond the borders of your own world into a larger universe or multiverse. These games are played from Setting to Setting, allowing gamers to experience a multitude of worlds with the same characters, and can involve battles against reality-ending threats.

Defining a game's Scope allows the Guide to prepare appropriately for what the Players are expecting. If the Players encounter a challenge and elect to travel to another city or continent to prepare themselves for it, the Guide will need to be ready to present the NPCs and events that the Players will encounter in their new, remote location. For that reason, smaller Scopes may be easier to run for Guides; games of larger Scope may require more in-depth plotting on the part of the Guide, often resulting in a more linear story.

## GAME SPIN

A game's Spin defines how kind the Gamescape is and, to a certain extent, how much the Guide can undermine the intentions of the Players. There are two extreme Spins, Light and Dark, but many Players can find the extremes either boring or frustrating. So three Spins act as a mix between the two, allowing your gaming group to customize how much happiness and horror they experience:

- **Light:** Good intentions breed good outcomes. People in the Gamescape tend to be kind-hearted and give the benefit of the doubt to others; the world bends toward righteousness. The Guide doesn't have much leeway to twist the actions and intentions of the Player Characters into something negative; if the Players intend to do justice, even if they overlooked something, their plans generally end well.

- **Mostly Light:** Your game is a blend of mostly Light and some Dark. The people of the Gamescape are largely good-hearted, but there are some villains who cast long shadows. These villains are powerful and intelligent, and interacting with them tends to end badly if the PCs are not careful. The intentions of the Players will generally win out, but they will have to be careful, for injustice takes root in unheeded shadows.
- **Mix:** Your game is a blend of Light and Dark. The people of the Gamescape have no general inclination; good is good and evil is evil. Players cannot make assumptions about anyone they encounter. The results of Player Character actions go awry if they're not careful, no matter their intentions.
- **Mostly Dark:** Your game is a blend of mostly Dark and some Light. The Gamescape stands mostly in shadows, but there are some bastions of civilization that provide light. People are often cruel or evil, but not always, and can have hidden or surprising streaks of goodness in them. Players must be careful to work out the best plans, because overlooked issues will rebound, causing the Player Characters and their allies to suffer.
- **Dark:** Intentions are not enough; the world is bent toward shadow and ruin, and you must be careful because every crack in your plans will haunt you. People in the Gamescape are generally cruel or evil, and expect the same of others. The Guide has ultimate leeway to twist the actions and intentions of the Player Characters into something negative, and Players and Guide alike are encouraged to try and outwit each other.

A game's Spin can indicate the potential difficulty of a game. For instance, Players interested in playing great heroes out to overcome evil will have a much easier time in a Light game than in a Dark game. Alternately, villainous Player Characters will find their schemes much more difficult to accomplish in a Light game than in a Dark game, because the people of the Gamescape will be stacked against them – there will always be another hero to stand in their way. However, villainous characters can still find significant trouble in Dark games, because they must not only face heroes, but other villains. The intentions of the Player Characters combined with the Spin of the game will determine how adversarial the relationship between Players and Guide will be.

## MAGIC TIER

The amount of magic in a Gamescape transforms not only the level of challenge the Player Characters will face when fighting enemies, but also the world itself as NPCs take advantage of magic to shape the world around them to their greatest convenience. The Magic Tiers determine how much magic is available to PCs and NPCs, and how similar the Setting is to medieval reality. The four Magic Tiers available in *Forthright Open Roleplay* are:

- **No Magic:** Magic does not exist. Arcana-using Roles are not available for play as PCs or NPCs, and magical items cannot be purchased, created or found. There are also likely restrictions on the available Species, as a lack of magic will reduce the variety of life in the Setting. This Tier will create a Setting similar to the middle ages.
  - **Highest Power Level for Magic Items:** None; Alchemists and Enchanters unavailable for play.
- **Low Magic:** Magic exists, but it is rare and special. Arcana-using Roles are available, but such characters are highly unusual and are likely either the only magical people in the world or among a very select few. Magic items are precious, and their minor effects are considered amazing by the populace. A variety of Species is present, but magic otherwise has not transformed the Setting far from reality in the middle ages.
  - **Highest Power Level for Magic Items:** Minor.
- **High Magic:** Magic exists and is common. Arcana-using Roles are available, and those characters are part of a strong tradition that is consulted by those in need. Magic items are relatively commonplace, such that the truly great have one or more, and can be extremely powerful. A variety of Species is present, and magic has transformed the Setting into a world more similar to medieval myth than medieval fact. This is the default Tier.
  - **Highest Power Level for Magic Items:** Medium.

- **Abundant Magic:** Magic exists and is ubiquitous. Arcana-using Roles are commonplace and nothing special, and most people have some degree of magical ability. Magic items can possess world-shattering power, and it is typical to carry around multiple such items. A variety of Species is present. Because magic is used to ease the burdens of daily life, the Setting is a magical variation of modern reality using magic instead of technology.
  - **Highest Power Level for Magic Items:** Major.

The Magic Tier shapes not only the Gamescape but how the Player Characters will interact with it. Because lower-magic Settings are more mundane, the challenges they face will be less likely to be magical in nature and their reactions to challenges will be easier to anticipate. In higher-magic Settings the PCs will have greater access to magic, but so too will their enemies. The more magic available in a Setting, the more everyone will be reliant upon it to help them overcome their challenges.

## GAME NAME

The name of the game is the last to be selected, and might not even be determined by the end of Session Zero. The Name encapsulates in a very few words the adventure that the Players will experience. Take your time in choosing a name for the game; it, like the title of a good book or movie, will make sense in time. You might name your game after a series of published adventures that you plan to incorporate into your game. You might never name your game beyond “Thursday night sword and sorcery” or “Saturday afternoon barbarians,” and that’s fine. As long as you can identify the game to which the Game Charter belongs, you’re ready to move on to identifying the Fellowship.

