

Sex and RPGs

“Sex is emotion in motion.” - Mae West

Sex is drama, and drama is the stuff of which great role-playing campaigns are made. As a plot mechanism, sex opens subplots involving espionage, vengeance, comedy, betrayal, and everything else one might find in a good opera.¹

But using sex in a narrative is tricky. Role playing scenes of sex and seduction can be awkward, to put it mildly. Most RPG designers reduce seduction to a die roll, and leave it at that. That is because they are nerdy, sexless poltroons. We shall do better.

Sex and Death have something in common – they have the potential for life-changing dramatic content. And with sex, you can have it more than once.²

The Plot Thickens

Using sex as a plot point isn't exactly difficult. That's why poor writers resort to it whenever they run out of ideas, and why the plots in porn movies and romance novels are so very, very lame. But thin plots are the death of a role-playing narrative³, so the first question to answer is how to use sex to built plot and character.

The first question to ask yourself as a GM is, “Why is this NPC interested in having sex with this PC? What's the agenda?” Unlike real people, NPCs in a role-playing campaign don't do anything just for the Hell of it. Here are some possible reasons that the NPC is in a heat over your PC, and how those motivations might add to your plot:

1) The NPC is in love, or hopelessly infatuated with the PC

This is an obvious one, though often overlooked. Not everyone interested in knocking boots with the PC is a spy trying to seduce information out of the PC or setting them up for an ambush. This situation will, if properly set up, give you an NPC who is significant to the PC, and possibly to the entire party. If the PC has mercenary motives, things are likely to get complicated. And if the PC callously dumps them once they have the pass codes to the villain's lair, the launch codes, or the McGuffin, you have a ready-made vengeance plot. Ex-lovers,

¹ Most role-players do not like opera. Suits me fine. I can continue to plunder their over-the-top, violent, convoluted plots with impunity, lift their complex characters, etc. Bellini's “La Sonnambula” gave me a complex, spooky plot to use in a modern horror campaign, as did Berg's “Lulu.” I sometimes play the overtures of the operas I'm using to set the tone during the prologue. Don't tell your players you're doing that, of course. If they're clever enough, or well-read enough to figure it out, they deserve a hint.

² And also, unlike death, you can choose to not have it at all. Pity.

³ The creation of a porn RPG is a frontier yet to be crossed. Whoever does it first stands to make a ridiculous amount of money, and to be invited to every gaming con in the universe.

relatives or friends of same can get powerfully exercised over such behavior. But if the PC's motives are relatively honorable, things can REALLY get complicated (read: full of nifty plot points.) Few are the lovers that want their partners to be risking life and limb gallivanting around the world seeking the Magic Whatzit. Even if the lover is an adventurer, the NPC may interfere with the PC's agenda, seeking to minimize risk, being over-protective, or otherwise giving the PC very productive headaches.

If the lover isn't aware of the PC's adventuring activities, this suggests another interesting series of problems – concealing things from someone with which you are intimately involved is difficult, and relationships take serious damage when the lover finds out that your whole background story was a lie. And where did you get that interesting scar?

On the other hand, a loving relationship can be a great boon to the PC. A source of emotional support can go a long way in ameliorating the sanity-crushing, socially disconnecting experience of life as a professional adventurer, which closely resembles, hell, usually IS the life of a professional criminal.⁴ And it adds much depth and color to the PC's life. It can also lead to financial help, or just a place to hide, or to crash. Such relationships require maintenance. It can be very hard to keep up with a lover when you're traveling hither and yon pursuing the Cult of the Black Gherkin. And your lover is not going to be happy that you forgot your anniversary because you were busy dealing with the Slime Boggins of Outer Thule.

Obviously, the GM will be tempted to imperil the love interest to get the immediate, urgent attention of the PC. Don't overdo this. I often wondered why Superman didn't just throw Jimmy Olsen and/or Lois Lane into the Sun after having been lured into the thousandth ambush set up by capturing them. Note that the likelihood of the loved one being imperiled should be proportional to how important they are to the PC, how discreet they are about their association, and how important the NPC is. If the NPC is a spy, or a wizard, or someone of significance, the situation is much more likely to turn problematic. If your lover is the deputy director of MI-6, or the offspring of the local potentate, there are obvious advantages to such an alliance. And tremendous liabilities.

Of course, if the loved one comes to harm, especially if the PC could or should have prevented it, the consequences should be devastating. Emotional instability is a certainty, perhaps with impacts on stats and skills. Possible legal complications are suggested. A shadowy stranger who was having an affair with a local – who then got their throat torn out by a Thing That Should Not Be is likely to attract the attention of Law Enforcement, or worse, another group involved in pursuing, or facilitating the alien menace.

⁴ See my next essay: "Crime and RPGs – Player Characters Are a Bunch of Anti-Social Bastards"

2) The NPC likes to have a lot of sex

Two words: Jealous lovers. Promiscuous NPCs tend to have a line of spurned lovers trailing after them. They will not take well to this interloping stranger. “I could have made her love me if that damned drifter hadn’t interfered!” Even if the loser can’t do anything about it themselves, they may go off to the local mafia don, voodoo priestess, or public decency patrol.

3) The NPC has a nefarious agenda

You don’t need a lot of help here. Maybe the NPC is a serial killer, or an enemy agent, or an evil sorcerer doing some sort of unpleasant ritual. Or maybe they’re just trying to make someone else jealous. In a campaign I was involved in as a player, someone else’s PC put the moves on a barfly who was trying to make her husband jealous. Said husband, no one special, just a local yob, attempted to punch the PC in the face. The PC overreacted by whipping out his deadly kung-fu mojo, and crippled the fool. Legal complications ensued, which led to his picture being pasted all over the local media, which put our enemies on our trail.

These are just three of an effectively infinite number of possible motivations, but all of them have one thing in common – a fact which is just as likely to be true in real life as it is in a well-plotted role-playing narrative. Sex complicates things.

Of course not every encounter needs to lead to a massive subplot. Maybe every once in awhile, a PC gets involved in a dalliance with no consequences attaching. Fine. Let that PC believe it will always be so. Then, one night...

The Mechanics of Role Playing Sex

Down, pardner. There is no need for orgasm tables or dice rolls indicating premature ejaculation. The problem I want to address is how to conduct such affairs across the gaming table without necessarily creating a giggle fest (unless that is your intention.) Seduction is a difficult art, no matter what end of the transaction you happen to be on. Since sex, like death, is likely to be a very significant plot point, it shouldn’t happen by accident. Keep the dice in the bag. If you think the subplot is worth the trouble, it happens. If not, the prospective partner isn’t interested.

Some role-playing systems have seduction skills, or more abstract stats like “Charisma” or “Appearance” included in the PC’s profile. If the PC wants to use those skills, fine. But don’t be a slave to the dice. If the PC acs a roll on such a skill, make things easy on them. If not, make it more awkward, and perhaps less significant in the short run. After all, a real Casanova isn’t deterred by a single rejection.

Now, you are in the delicate situation of having a player who is trying to seduce (or being seduced by) an NPC. I am a former professional actor, and a DM of forty plus years experience,

but I have a difficult time making bedroom eyes and pillow talk at another male across a table. If the player were a female, it would likely become even more awkward. But this is a significant moment in your narrative. What to do?

First, there is no need to go into descriptions of the actual act. Take a hint from Hayes Code movies – stop at the bedroom door, and pick up again with the lovers laying, happily exhausted in tangled sheets. Trying to get all porny will wreck the scene. Trust me on this.

This still leaves you with the problem of the seduction itself. I usually play the NPC in conversation. In these sorts of scenes, I simply go into narrator mode. For example:

“She looks down and adjusts the hem of her dress. Then she looks at you through her long, black eyelashes, the low light flashing in her eyes. She runs a long, elegant finger around the edge of her martini glass. “So,” she says, “You were telling me about your adventures. You must have tremendous skills with your...weapon.”

This will work, if you work at it. Try not to be too damned funny. The scene will...um...deflate. Lose all tension. So to speak.

There's Got to Be a Morning After

Even if it's not morning. In a campaign I was GMing, our heroine awakened the next morning to the smell of brewing coffee. She roused herself from sleep (after making sure that the pistol she had carefully hidden was still there,) and went into the kitchen. The NPC was making her breakfast. How sweet. She opened the refrigerator to get cream. And found a neatly stacked pile of human ring fingers. Female fingers. All with the same ring – the one she was now wearing, having taken it from a cultist some weeks ago...

His back was still to her, laboring over a hot stove. “Over easy?” he asked.

Maybe not so much, next time.