

Project Khitomer 2020

Writing Mysteries and Twists, and How Much Do You Tell The Crew

Hosts: [\[PF\] AlexM \(Pegasus Fleet\)](#)

Room Two • Session 2

[\[PF\] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:01:09 AM](#)

Hello, everyone. I hope you have all been enjoying Project Khitomer 2020 so far. My name is Alex. As I mentioned during the opening ceremonies, I've been simming for the past ten to twelve years, and running my current sim, Starbase 332, for about the past seven years.

I had been doing some thinking for the last couple of months about what I wanted to do for my Khitomer panel this year, and this conversation came to me while I was brainstorming ideas for a future mission. I decided that it would be the perfect topic of a conversation, and something that I'm sure we have all thought about from time to time. How do we incorporate mysteries and twists into our writing, and how much do we share with our crews before the reveal?

So first off, what do I mean by mysteries and twists? Simply put, I'm referring to any major plot development that is planned from the beginning by the game master, but where the details are kept secret from the rest of the crew until time for the reveal. I've split this idea into two categories because although they are similar, I feel that they are distinct in execution. For the purposes of this discussion, I'm defining mystery as an unknown plot development that represents the end goal for the story. The characters involved in the story are aware that there is an unknown element, and it is up to the characters to make their way towards revealing that unknown.

A twist is an unknown element that may be properly hinted at throughout the story, but ultimately is intended as a surprise to the characters involved. It may be the end goal of a particular story, or a major turning point that leads to the endgame, but the characters are not aware that this plot point is waiting to ambush them.

Note that in the definitions above I referenced the *characters* and their knowledge of the situation. The knowledge of the *players* in these situations is what I want to discuss today. Simming, and collaborative writing in general, introduces an interesting conundrum for players and game masters. I'd like to start with the game master perspective. As game masters for our respective sims, it is often our responsibility to develop engaging stories for the members of our crews. Mysteries are a way for us to lead our crew forward by creating an end goal for the story, something that will drive our characters towards the resolution as we have devised. Twists, however, create an opportunity for the game master to hang onto an Ace in the hole, so to speak. It can be a way to introduce a new plot element and to spur activity based on something

unexpected happening. When done correctly, it can be a way to build up the drama in our writing. Both I feel can be very effective tools.

As COs and game masters, how have you used mysteries and twists in your games, and what kind of challenges have you run into? What worked well? What worked poorly? Feel free to share some examples.

[22] Confusedfire [VFY|CO] 2/22/2020, 11:05:38 AM

I have found that in regards to arcs it works best in pieces. I ask my players if they want to play any of the antagonists in some cases and in others I pick a few of them to play key roles for the story. Right now VFY is doing a very long term story that's very slow burn. My command team and I are the only ones who know what's going on, but we are doing side posts to release pieces of information.

I have even started doing FNS articles on the database to give other pieces of information for the plot

Billy/USS Sutherland 2/22/2020, 11:06:15 AM

When in ACTD the Dakota was hunting pirates for weapons of mass destruction, every time we scanned their ships we did not find any weapons. We boarded them nothing...did not dawn on the crew until later that the weapons of mass destruction were scientist that created said weapons. Plot twist

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:06:35 AM

@Confusedfire Do you prefer when other players write for the antagonists?

[PF]Kai1701E 2/22/2020, 11:06:38 AM(edited 2/22/2020, 11:06:47 AM)

Last year, I ran a mission on Nogura where we introduced a Borg arc, where they attacked the AQ and we were looking at a Battlestar Galactica type scenario. Only, just at the very point where we all thought the ship was going to be destroyed, I flipped it into a situation where the crew were in a simulation caused by being captive by a new species. Very few of the players knew and I kept it that way on purpose.

Beautiful Night 2/22/2020, 11:07:04 AM

I'm really just in the setting up phase. Right now I'm seeding a lot of stuff with hints that aren't meant to be actioned right away, and will develop into mysteries.

[22] Confusedfire [VFY|CO] 2/22/2020, 11:07:12 AM

In many cases yes because it keeps me on my toes and it keeps my command team on theirs. It also makes joint posts more realistic and it allows the story to flow differently

[PF] Amethyst 2/22/2020, 11:07:55 AM

My XO has just taken over part of the current mission we're running on Astraea... he's running it almost like a 'pick a path' book.

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:08:14 AM

I've always been a fan of sowing seeds that may or may not ever grow into anything. I have a NPC on my sim that's a mole. For whom or what purpose I have no idea. But I've already decided who it's going to be.

[PF] Amethyst 2/22/2020, 11:08:28 AM

He narrates part of it, then leaves it for a crew response. how they respond determines what page we go to next.

[SA] Wes of Star Army 2/22/2020, 11:08:44 AM

Oh I agree completely that making things a little unpredictable is completely necessary to RP/simming being fun. The element of surprise can and should be used to delight and to maintain interest. Basically logging on wondering what's happening next is a major part of making things enjoyable. Too little surprise and it turns into work just filling in an outline like a school project, too much surprise and things start to jump the shark or make no sense so you've got to find what works for you and fellow players as a group.

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:08:51 AM

I personally love having another player as the antagonist. It makes it much more enjoyable for me to engage with the character.

[STF] Simmyish 2/22/2020, 11:09:03 AM

One thing I've learned in my GM career is that players *will* surprise you no matter how much you prepare 😊

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:09:34 AM

Haha, that's certainly the truth.

[22] Confusedfire [VFY|CO] 2/22/2020, 11:09:40 AM

That's why I always leave my episodes as open ended as I can

[22][118][SARP] Kylindra 2/22/2020, 11:10:12 AM

mm.. I tried to write a mystery mission, but it's harder in fleets where the players can actually totally rewrite the plot.

Billy/USS Sutherland 2/22/2020, 11:10:19 AM

Also I found out that having the crews input is important when developing

[16th] NX-1701-G 2/22/2020, 11:10:57 AM

I just did a twist on Starfleet One where we were on a diplomatic mission to the Dominion. We were getting ready to host them when suddenly the Dominion attacked unprovoked. After the ship took heavy damage we revealed it was a simulation.

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:11:23 AM

How did the crew respond to that twist?

[22] Confusedfire [VFY|CO] 2/22/2020, 11:12:08 AM

Something similar happened on Onnar... The premise was that several characters got kidnapped and given the ages of the characters I told my players to be careful, but otherwise they had free reign... Then they pulled the wool over my eyes and made it all a simulation

[16th] NX-1701-G 2/22/2020, 11:12:11 AM(edited 2/22/2020, 11:14:17 AM)

We did it last night 😊

My internet is being wonky and I haven't checked posts yet.

Ok 12 posts since last night. Seemingly positive.

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:13:43 AM

That's something that I'm always a little worried about. I've planned twists in the past, but sometimes the response is a bit lackluster. Or maybe more indifferent. So far I don't think I've really got to experience the crew being in awe of my reveal.

[16th] NX-1701-G 2/22/2020, 11:15:00 AM

Oh I was a bit paranoid about it too

Beautiful Night 2/22/2020, 11:15:32 AM

I often wonder how to get players invested enough in the mystery to make it a "good" reveal.

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:15:53 AM

I think that is definitely a challenge.

I ran a couple missions a while back on my sim that featured some plot twists. The first of the two started with an ion storm passing through the area, and the mission composed primarily of preparing the station's defenses and shoring up the power grid. Once the storm hit, the effects of the storm knocked out sensors and communications, and power fluctuations all over the station kept us occupied for the duration of the storm. Once the storm had passed and main systems started coming back online, the crew made a shocking revelation. The starbase was no longer in the same location that we once were. In fact, we were many, many lightyears away from our previous position. What was revealed in the next mission is that the ion storm was dragging a wormhole, and ultimately we were able to attract the end of the wormhole we came out to return relatively close to home.

The goal for the twist was to set up a feeling of apprehension and mystery, and drive the crew members to find out what had happened. Unfortunately it didn't work as well as I would have liked. The response to the twist was maybe warm at best. It wasn't that anyone really hated it twist, but it didn't seem to have the same impact that I was hoping for. It was the same with a later event in that second mission. While the station was working on a way to return home, one of our garrison ships met an untimely fate against a swarm of space faring lifeforms. The ship was lost for dramatic effect to set up the severity of the incoming threat. But beyond a few of my crew members, most of the crew didn't seem to be as sentimental as I am.

Has anyone ever run into a situation where the twist just did not go over as well as you had hoped?

[22] Confusedfire [VFY|CO] 2/22/2020, 11:17:28 AM

The plot twist I revealed in VFY last episode was that the station gets destroyed and crash lands into the planet... Some of the players knew it was coming, but most of them didn't. It kind of fell flat, but the other players mostly seemed to like it

It was all an alternate reality, but given their knowledge of how I like to destroy stuff they kind of expected it.

[OF] Paul - CO USS Athena 2/22/2020, 11:18:44 AM

Do people not find that a lot of people nowadays seem to fall away from plots where they don't know what is going on or what the ending is? Feel like I have seen that a lot lately.

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:21:40 AM

I've noticed that a lot. A challenge that I often run into with a starbase is that the size of the station and the crew makes it difficult to include every single person in every single mission. Even in missions like the one I mentioned above, there was something for everyone to do. We set up the situation (ion storm comes to the station) and gave general orders (engineering prepares for repairs, medical for wounded, science to monitor the storm, etc.), but I still had people asking what they were supposed to be doing.

Maybe not having that end goal in sight does make some people less interested.

[22] Confusedfire [VFY|CO] 2/22/2020, 11:22:15 AM

I try to have 2 main plotlines in an episode to give everyone something

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:22:34 AM

Since we already started talking about it a bit, what about the player perspective? As members of the crew and as collaborative writers, do you like when the CO plans twists? Do you ever feel like you've been led by the nose to come to a certain plot development?

[22] Confusedfire [VFY|CO] 2/22/2020, 11:22:59 AM

I think the plot twists make it more interesting

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:23:53 AM

So you like it when the CO doesn't tell you everything that they have up their sleeve?

[PF] Amethyst 2/22/2020, 11:25:07 AM

I think plot twists are good. Just like watching a movie or a tv show or reading a book... I love the whole *gasp* I did NOT see that coming! aspect

Beautiful Night 2/22/2020, 11:25:10 AM

I like surprises. but I also have players who don't like it when they don't know the end of a plot or post because they're scared of screwing things up by improvising

[22] Confusedfire [VFY|CO] 2/22/2020, 11:25:46 AM

That's when, as GM's, we just need to improvise ourselves a little bit

Lady Barbara 2/22/2020, 11:25:48 AM

That's a good point @Beautiful Night

Saskbertan81 2/22/2020, 11:26:22 AM

I've always tried to tell my players that I'll set the framework up but it's up for them to build the rest of the house... Metaphorically

[16th] NX-1701-G 2/22/2020, 11:26:41 AM

I like plot twists. They keep things going.

[22][118][SARP] Kylindra 2/22/2020, 11:26:43 AM

I.. tend to find tht I can fall out of plots easily

So, in order to help everyone else, I just stop adding plot twists and moving the plot forward too much

Because twists are cool, and I enjoy them, but some are.. rather atonal and can wreck the immersion? If that makes sense

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:27:50 AM

That makes sense. I think that's always a risk with plot twists.

Myz Phoenix 2/22/2020, 11:29:01 AM

I've found that I have some writers that thrive on plot twists, while others don't handle them so well. I think it's important to know which writers you need to hand details to, and those you don't.

Lady Barbara 2/22/2020, 11:29:35 AM

I think if the GM makes an effort to keep everyone involved in a plot twist, and not just the handful of characters/writers directly involved in it, it can be an enjoyable experience. Otherwise, you leave some writers frustrated because they were basically left to their own devices

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:29:39 AM

I sometimes think about the infamous *Dallas* twist of an entire season being just a dream. From a player or a viewer of the story, I could see a lot of frustration caused by that because it invalidates any character development.

[PF] Capt. Franklin Johnson 2/22/2020, 11:29:41 AM

For my sim, our plot twists are intertwined in the background main plot which the characters unknowingly interact on. So far it's worked out well for us.

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:30:52 AM

So far we've talked mostly about twists. I want to touch on mysteries.

Another recent idea that I had for a mission actually gave me the inspiration for this panel. I haven't started any real planning at this point, but the idea was around a good ol' fashion whodunit. The idea was that a member of the crew, or a couple members of the crew, would be attending a diplomatic event. Alternatively it could be a holodeck scenario, but I was more interested in a "real life" situation. While they are at said function, a murder takes place, and naturally everyone is a suspect.

While I haven't done any planning beyond the initial idea, my thought would be that I as game master would be playing most of the NPCs, with maybe some help from another player or two. Our heroes, as well as their players, would be unaware of the true culprits. But they will be greatly involved in the ensuing investigation to find out who committed the murder and why. Using classic mystery tropes and clues left behind (meaning that we'll be doing a lot of upfront planning), only myself and maybe an accomplice will know the identity of the murder from the beginning.

[16th] NX-1701-G 2/22/2020, 11:31:19 AM

Ooh

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:31:34 AM

Besides the incredible amount of planning, there are a few concerns that I would have with such a plot. Assuming that I have players interested in solving the mystery and playing along, there will be a lot of upfront work to be done to prepare. Character bios and possible motives will need to be detailed, and a number of clues and red herrings setup throughout the story. Having never written anything of the sort before, I'm a little intimidated by that.

The other concern is just making sure that the players involved are following along with where I want them to go. If they get off script, so to speak, do I need to be prepared to improvise and change up my plans so that the clues are steered towards the conclusions that they are making? Or do I need to use the NPCs to steer them back on course towards the conclusion that I already planned? In a true roleplaying game, I feel like I would lean towards the latter. But as collaborative writers, the former seems more appropriate. Have any of you ever considered a similar kind of plot? If so how did it go? Did you run into any issues?

[PF] Capt. Franklin Johnson 2/22/2020, 11:32:05 AM

We are presently conducting such a plot atm, the culprit involved is generally loved by everyone, so we feel things are proceeding nominally.

[16th] NX-1701-G 2/22/2020, 11:33:43 AM

I didn't do a murder but I did host a storyline where a new sensor was stolen. To be honest I used it to bring some of my less involved players in and it was intended that the designer had stolen it herself (with clues having been laid). Sadly one of the players I had designed to be heavily involved in the storyline chose to make his character the thief because he was leaving the group.

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:34:07 AM

@Drakomis How do you think you would handle things if the investigation does not go in the direction you want?

Similar question @nx1701g. Things didn't quite go as planned because a player went off the rails, so to speak. Did it mess with your plans? How did you adapt?

[PF] Capt. Franklin Johnson 2/22/2020, 11:39:13 AM

We have anticipated multiple variables for the main plot - we write those down on a google doc and occasionally over the few weeks to months the mission is going on, check back on it. Right now we have multiple availabilities for differences in what we expect, variables not intended for. We always fall back on the rule of consequence since we're treating our sim similar to a D&D campaign; the players say how they react and the world reacts accordingly.

In reference to your question and to properly answer it, if by chance the crew go completely off the rails, we have set guidelines in place that determine the fate of the character. If, for example, the crew do not appropriately take notice to missing items or unusual variables that begin to transpire, the consequences of that lack of insight would lead to the death of aforementioned character. Wherein should steps be taken, in any capacity, to take note then aforementioned character would likely survive.

But again, supposing it goes completely off course and out of variables, then we'd resort to reacting to the players appropriately and gently nudging them back on course with plot hooks as a completely last resort.

[16th] NX-1701-G 2/22/2020, 11:40:14 AM

I looked at the storyline and talked with the player, first off, to be sure it was what he wanted to do. That was when he confirmed to me he really wanted to leave and had been thinking of a way to write himself out. I asked his permission to have made it his character had been involved with the Tal'Priaex (our game is set in the 25th Century) and had been sabotaging the ship. He agreed and we continued the story with him replacing the original thief.

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:40:18 AM

It sounds like things worked out in that case, @nx1701g, even if it did mean that you were losing a player. It probably had a more emotional punch to it.

[16th] NX-1701-G 2/22/2020, 11:40:59 AM

Surprisingly he came back as a new character a year later

My game averages a 6 year retention

Not making that up

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:41:58 AM

@Drakomis It sounds like that's a good way to handle it. I think with any mystery, and with any collaborative writing, being flexible and adaptable is key.

[16th] NX-1701-G 2/22/2020, 11:42:03 AM

I have players who have been with me since we started in 2001

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:42:12 AM

And if done well, you can always claim that it was your original intent anyway.

[16th] NX-1701-G 2/22/2020, 11:42:19 AM

Sadly he passed away recently

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:42:29 AM

I'm very sorry to hear that.

[PF] Capt. Franklin Johnson 2/22/2020, 11:42:45 AM

I agree, we're trying to be flexible since most of my command staff is familiar with D&D. We're treating it as an experiment and, if successful, building on it.

Condolences NX.

[22][118][SARP] Kylindra 2/22/2020, 11:43:22 AM

Sorry to hear that. 😞

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:43:26 AM

Maybe that's how I would want to approach my mystery. Clue: The Movie did have like three or four different endings.

[22][118][SARP] Kylindra 2/22/2020, 11:43:43 AM

But yeah, I find that a good GM (which I am *super not*) can be flexible enough to rework the mystery, but I think it also matters what it is

a closed-room mystery has few possible solutions, for example, so it has to be something that can take multiple solutions to be good in a sim

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:45:01 AM

That's why I think it's going to be so challenging. Do I only allow the players to "find" clues that I've placed? Or let them find their own clues and adapt the NPCs accordingly?

ReminderBot 2/22/2020, 11:45:01 AM

15-Minute Warning

[16th] NX-1701-G 2/22/2020, 11:45:11 AM(edited 2/22/2020, 11:46:51 AM)

Don't be hard on yourself @ø_ø. I'm sure you're a super GM

I let the players find the clues normally, but I can lead them to them but not force them to find the clue

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:46:06 AM

Agreed. I'm sorry that I glossed over that. Being a good GM takes practice. I know I'm by no means the best at it. I have a lot of ideas, but not always the best in execution.

[16th] NX-1701-G 2/22/2020, 11:46:23 AM

If it keeps getting missed I may have a eureka moment for one of my npcs

[PF] Capt. Franklin Johnson 2/22/2020, 11:46:32 AM

If you contribute your passion into the story, @ø_ø, you're already a good GM in my book.

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:47:42 AM

It looks like we're coming up on the last few minutes of our time. Does anyone have any other thoughts that they'd like to share? Any ideas that they've been considering that you want to bring up?

[PF] Capt. Franklin Johnson 2/22/2020, 11:48:02 AM

I'd like to emphasize what I stated concern Kylindra.

If those of you, like me, who are still getting into the wedge of things with GM's/DM's, don't be afraid to experiment. The most important factor I can contribute to that is if you're having fun, more than likely so is your crew.

[22/OF] Kasterborous 2/22/2020, 11:49:20 AM

that's definitely good advice 😊

[22][118][SARP] Kylindra 2/22/2020, 11:49:24 AM

(thanks for the compliments! >_>) Yeah. If you're not having fun, me as a player.. I can tell.

[16th] NX-1701-G 2/22/2020, 11:49:35 AM

As long as you have a passion for your game you are a great GM. We are actually doing a panel on this tonight called Engage!

[22][118][SARP] Kylindra 2/22/2020, 11:49:41 AM

It actually led me to leave one of my fleets for a year or so until I was able to process it. <_<

(so yeah, if you write a mystery, and run it with passion, I know I as a player will work with you, so it's always wise to kinda just get everyone on board. <_<)

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:51:07 AM

Generally speaking, if your players aren't enjoying themselves, one way or another they will let you know.

[16th] NX-1701-G 2/22/2020, 11:51:23 AM

Yep

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:51:48 AM

And don't be afraid to shift tactics. A good GM knows when it's time to cut your losses and try something else.

[STF] Simmyish 2/22/2020, 11:52:06 AM

part of being a creator is killing some of your work

[OF] B 2/22/2020, 11:52:11 AM

Something I've learned to do recently

[22] TheeFlamehead[MISC DivHead]/22/2020, 11:52:16 AM

Very true! Refreshes or resets can save an otherwise dying simm

[STF] Simmyish 2/22/2020, 11:52:25 AM

some advice I have been given before and I've noticed is important more and more

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:53:20 AM

I know we're getting a bit off the topic, although that was all great advice. Is there anything else about twists or mysteries that anyone would like to share?

[16th] NX-1701-G 2/22/2020, 11:53:44 AM

Don't be afraid to experiment with twists

[PF] Capt. Franklin Johnson 2/22/2020, 11:53:48 AM

^

[16th] NX-1701-G 2/22/2020, 11:54:12 AM

And if you have a mystery make sure you plan it out especially if its over multiple 'episodes'

[22][118][SARP] Kylindra 2/22/2020, 11:54:24 AM

And, don't be afraid to rapidly pivot away from something that doesn't work instead of dragging it out. You can *kill* something by waiting too long to move on.

[PF] Capt. Franklin Johnson 2/22/2020, 11:54:50 AM

I'll hand you the advice I got from a fellow writer, who is excellent in mystery. When I asked how he approached the reader consideration to a mystery, he told me this:

"The best mystery is the one where the reader doesn't know they're in a mystery."

ReminderBot 2/22/2020, 11:55:04 AM

5-Minute Warning

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:55:42 AM

I think that's very good advice.

And very profound, haha.

[PF] Capt. Franklin Johnson 2/22/2020, 11:55:57 AM

xD

He explained it allowed more avenues of approach rather than constricting himself to one set value; explore the characters through their development in the story.

I took a lot of advice from that man.

[PF] AlexM 2/22/2020, 11:57:39 AM

It sounds like he had a lot of good advice.

It's now time for us to be wrapping up and getting ready for the next panel. I'd like to thank all of you for joining me today for this discussion, and I hope that you all enjoy the rest of the conference. If anyone wants to continue the conversation, feel free to head on over to #680468458340745450. Otherwise, thank you again for joining me. I think we had a very good discussion.