

# Big Secrets and Big Plots in Roleplaying Games

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So many roleplaying game plots revolve around secrets. GMs try to make sure that there's always another mystery in the game for the characters to run after and solve - lots of people love a good mystery. Secrets add spice and interest to a game. They make your players go nuts trying to figure out what's going on.

They're also intrinsic to many plots. In order to stop the bad guy from executing his evil plan, you need to find out who he is, or what he's trying to do, or when, or how. Maybe you need to uncover his dark secret in order to stop him, or you need to discover an unlikely ally. All of these are secrets. Secrets help you to add more to a plot than just "kill the bad guy."

## The Problem with Big Secrets

Really big secrets are the ones that entire huge plots revolve around. They're secrets that might well change the world the characters exist in. And they have a few inherent problems.

Once you've revealed a big secret, that's it. In a way it's all over. Many players will be disappointed to return to smaller things, and it's difficult to keep coming up with large and important secrets to throw at your players. Large secrets also tend to make players jaded: what's so exciting about finding out the villain's amazing world-altering secret when you've already done it twice this month? Your next secret will have to be even bigger and better in order to cut it, and there's a limit to how far that can go. Even before you hit that limit, things will likely start looking ridiculous.

You could instead try to make your secrets last, but this too can backfire. Holding a big secret just out of reach for too long frustrates people. In addition, not all players enjoy solving big secrets. Some people just aren't good at mysteries, and feel frustrated when presented with them.

Big secrets are an all-or-nothing thing. If you have a bunch of small secrets and your gaming group finds one of them out before you expected them to, it doesn't throw your game off all that much. If you have only one big one, however, then an ill-timed guess or discovery can throw off your entire story.

## Variation in Secret-Keeping

One solution to these problems is to vary the size of your secrets, to play with plenty of little secrets as well as the large ones. If you want to play with a big secret, work a bunch of little ones into the plot to be solved first. Or you could create your large secret out of little ones, so that as your players uncover the small secrets they start to put together the bigger puzzle. They get small revelations that eventually become one large one. (This latter technique may require some experience and practice.)

All of this allows your players to feel like they're getting somewhere and keeps them from becoming frustrated. This allows you to draw out the big secret at the end of the plot as long as possible without irritating people. Your players will feel the euphoria of revelation and progress without having to solve a great mystery of the universe every week.

It also means that you can surprise your players without completely jading them, and without having to change your entire world around every Saturday. If your players come to expect that large secrets are rare and special things, then they'll treat them that way. Such secrets will have more significance and more appeal. They won't create the expectation that next week the party will get to discover another fundamental secret of the universe.

Too many earth-shaking changes makes more work for you - every time you shake things up you have to re-think your NPCs and re-write the details of half of your plots. It may also make your game seem a little ridiculous (although this obviously depends on the genre and system). Varying the size and epic-ness of your secrets and plots keeps this from happening.

## Small Secrets

Play with plenty of little secrets in between the big ones. Why does the prim and proper lady down the street go out every Thursday at midnight and not return until noon the next day? What's that blue flickering light that shines from your neighbor's basement window at night? Why can't you remember last Tuesday morning, anyway?

The "best" and most inspiring RPG material I've seen is always material that contains dozens of tiny, throw-away mysteries. Almost every paragraph mentions some weird oddity and doesn't really explain it. These are small things, not secrets that will change the nature of the universe. But they inspire, they provide material for the party to play with, and they provide excitement and revelation without disrupting your universe.

In addition, they give the players who can't solve mysteries to save their own lives something to play with. Small mysteries tend to be much easier to solve: You follow the prim and proper lady. You sneak into your neighbor's basement. You ask people around your neighborhood whether they saw where you went last Tuesday morning. Not all mysteries involve webs of clues and payoffs. Even someone who swears up and down that they hate mysteries may find some fun in hunting down the easy answer to a small

question. You're no longer stuck with a choice between leaving mysteries out entirely or alienating one of your players.

## **Add More Secrets**

If, despite your best efforts, your players solve your big mystery several weeks early and throw off your entire game, then add a few more secrets. Sit down for a few minutes. Call a ten-minute time out if you have to in the middle of the game. Think about what other unsolved details there might be to the plot. Think about any small, adjunct bits that the group hasn't solved yet, particularly if they require the group to work their way through the rest of the material you had planned.

Worst case, accept that the secret is out. See if you can cannibalize the material you prepared for that mystery and use it for another, new mystery. And this time, throw in more small mysteries to distract and mislead your group. If they have to solve one mystery before they'll even know to start on the second, you can better control where in the plot they are.

## **Secrets and Plots**

As you may have noticed, the title of this article is "Big Secrets and Big *Plots*," yet I've mostly talked about secrets. This is because in the context of this article, the two concepts are largely interchangeable. Big secrets tend to make players jaded; big plots tend to make players jaded. Your next secret will have to be bigger and better; your next plot will have to be bigger and better. You should vary the size of your secrets; you should vary the size of your plots. I guess this is because the secrets in your games are a subset of your plots. While secrets may be part of a plot, they often *are* a plot in and of themselves.

So vary the size of your secrets, but don't forget to apply this to your plots as well.

*My thanks go to Marshdrifter for pointing out the problem of letting the secret out too early.*