Running *Primetime Adventures*
at Game Days and Conventions

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Primetime Adventures is my favorite role-playing game.

Back when I organized the Tucson RPG Guild, I would take along the game as a backup, ready to run it if more players than GMs ready to play showed up. One afternoon I pitched a quick show that expanded to two seasons of play in a public space. Since then, I've played several series and one-shots at game days and conventions. While I have played *PTA* at home games, I prefer playing the game at public events.

There are a few challenges with playing session of *PTA* in public. You have a limited time to play, so the pitch session must be shortened. Players may come and go and people will stop by to watch the game in progress. Each time you play in public may be the first time some of the players have tried the game. You most likely will not get to complete a season of the show. In my gaming experience, I have come across a few techniques on how to manage *Primetime Adventures* and address these challenges.

THE TWENTY MINUTE PITCH SESSION

Let's assume you have a four hour game slot. To get your show started, you're going to have to blitz through the pitch. Because we're not dealing with a whole session of play for the pitch session at gaming events this is really condensed to a *pitch phase*.

Given four hours, our goal is to have protagonists ready and start the game a half hour in. But we're really targeting the twenty minute mark. This means we should get the buy-in—that moment when everyone at the table is interested in the show—at the ten minutes into the pitch phase.

HALF-BAKED SHOW CONCEPTS

A home game will usually spend the first half-hour of the pitch session determining what type of show to run. Everyone around the table comes up with premise ideas until they hit that moment where everything just clicks. For your public game, we can get to the buy–in point sooner by bringing a general description of the show to the table. "We're all cops in Batman's Gotham City"

gives potential players more information about the show, brings to your table a group of players that are interested in your show concept, and speeds up the pitch phase. Even something like "this will be set during the zombie apocalypse" brings us closer to the buy-in.

Once you have that show concept, you can flesh it out. As we sat down for the pitch session of what was originally *CSI: Gotham City*, we saw that we became more of a police procedural with characters coming across into various branches of the police department: Internal Affairs, the Medical Examiner's office, and even the S.W.A.T. team. Although two of the four regular players were detectives solving crime in the big city, the actual show grew beyond the simple "cops in Gotham City" premise.

Bringing a show concept still sets up a sandbox, but it adds walls. A sandbox without walls is a desert.

There is an additional benefit to coming up with a premise before the game begins. At a convention where game runners provide a description of their game sessions, I have found that more people will sign up for your *Primetime Adventures* game if you provide that show concept rather than a generic "play a television show" listing.

GETTING TO THE BUY–IN

When throwing out pitch ideas, there will be that moment when the concept clicks with the players at the table: you've got your show. One of the best examples of getting to a consensus on what the show will be was featured in the *Life on Mars* actual play recording, where Judd Karlman aggressively managed the pitch phase. He drove it forward at a quick pace while still keeping the excitement level up. I base my pitch method on Judd's.

Put walls around the sandbox: One of the first things to do is ask the players what they do *not* want to see in the series. By defining certain subject matters to avoid, the group doesn't waste time pushing for something that would alienate one of the players. For example, pushing for a legal show when one of the players is a lawyer and really, really doesn't want to bring his work to a game wastes precious game time.

Read the players: Keep an eye on how the players are reacting to some suggestions. If someone's body language is showing that something is off, check and see if they're cool with it (to make sure you're reading them correctly). "Let's table this bit and look at something else," is always okay to say. Keep checking the other players; seize the items that everyone is enjoying. Don't forget—you are a player in this game. You deserve to enjoy the game session as much as the others.

What station is the show on? This gives the table a great deal of information with a simple answer. I am in the United States, so I use a range of television stations that include over-the-air channels PBS, CBS, The CW; basic cable with USA and AMC; and premium cable stations like Showtime or HBO. The station identification is shorthand for the level of profanity, violence, and sex the show is going to have. Look around the play space: are there kids present? Maybe an HBO Original Series *isn't* best.

Avoid pre-playing the game: You and your players may want to delve into the backstory of the world you've just built or really detail the intricate web of protagonists and antagonists right now. Resist that urge. Show all that stuff in the actual episode. Once the show starts up, those elements may change to fit the story. Additionally, the time your groups devotes to the minutia of the series' details during the pitch is time taken away from actually showing the series.

DEVELOPING PROTAGONISTS

Now you're about ten or fifteen minutes into the pitch phase. Your group has expanded the show concept you brought to the table to a more defined premise. The basic rules for the show have been introduced ("We do not see Batman during the series—maybe a shadow moving in the background. Batman is a boogyman criminals tell their children.") and we may have thought of a character or two that belong to this show ("Oh, we've got to have Jim Gordon in there." "Maybe he's just a lieutenant at this point."). Our next step is to get a list of characters that might be in the show. By a list of characters, you don't need names, just a one-sentence description—the protagonist's concepts.

My friend Jason has a great take on this. He began a convention game with a show concept and pre-made several edges and connections for characters in the series. These edges and connections were there

on index cards for players to grab and build their protagonists. While creating protagonists is rather quick in *PTA*, pre-built traits not only helped to speed up that process, they also reinforced the type of game he wanted to run.

If your players are struggling to fill in those traits, ask them how someone else would describe that character and use that as an edge. Take that answer and flip it right back. If the player is still stuck, reword the protagonist's concept.

The group is doing a show based on The CW's Arrow. *Stephen is having difficulty coming up with a second edge or connection for his Oliver Queen character. The Producer asks, "How do other people see Oliver, now that he has returned to Starling City?"*

Stephen thinks for a moment before replying. "He's pretty much a playboy millionaire, so spoiled rich kid that thinks everything is a party. Something of a brat?"

"Okay," the Producer replies. "Put that down: 'Oliver is a spoiled rich kid looking for the next party.' Put quotes around it, so we know that's something said about him. Use it when doing things with high society and to make people underestimate him."

If you really feel pressed for time, allow players to leave that last edge or connection blank for now. They can fill it in during play.

I'm a big fan of using quotes for edges instead of phrases. The wording of a quote can illustrate as much about a character as the actual quote.

THE MID-SEASON SHOW

When running *Primetime Adventures* as a one-shot game, it is tempting to just use the Pilot Episode rules and just give everyone a screen presence of 2 and just go from there. Doing that doesn't show off how *PTA* shines as a season progresses. A pilot episode one-shot skips story arcs and how spotlight and background characters act. Assuming a quick pitch phase, we may complete two episodes of a show in a four-hour game slot. Don't run the pilot—jump right into an ongoing series! I suggest beginning by playing out the penultimate episode of this amazing sure-to-be award-winning series. Time permitting, we can get to the exciting season finale this very game session.

Finishing the season at an introductory game event gives the same benefits as running a standard pilot episode. If the players enjoyed the game and want to continue the series at the next game day or event, we are at a great breaking point.

Players can modify their protagonists' traits between seasons or even switch characters. And if we don't get to our season finale this time, things are set up for it, which may whet the appetite for future gaming.

To get that mid-season feeling, we must establish what has happened before. Luckily, we are halfway there: our group has just completed a pitch phase which came from the half-baked show concept brought to the table. But just like when a group sits down to play *Dungeons & Dragons*, we only know the generalities of the situation: there are dungeons to delve into, orcs to slay, and treasure to be found. We need to build specifics for our group not only to latch onto, but to foreshadow what we might find in this series.

PREVIOUSLY ON…

In a regular game of *PTA*, we begin with *Previously On…*, where the players recap the last episode we played. At the game day, we do something similar. Starting with the Producer, each player refers to a scene that already happened in the show. The Producer's scene should have a bearing on the plot of today's episode. (I like to point to a random player and have her say "Previously on *[name of show]*" in their best television announcer voice.)

> Our show is Pathfinder Chronicles*, with protagonists as part of a travelling adventuring group in a magical pastiche of pseudo–medieval European cultures and countries.*

> *The Producer begins by describing an elf on horseback, racing through a dark forest. We see a carved scroll-case on his belt. A voice-over, suitably evil: "It doesn't matter how many riders the Elf Lords send out." The elf's horse suddenly rears up as dark shadows rise up all around. "None shall reach the human lands in time." We can see the elf is dead on the ground, out of focus, as a scaled hand lifts the carved scroll-case into view, then squeezes it, crushing it into splinters. The Producer tells the player to her left to describe a scene.*

Like with the *Next Week On…* bit, each player contributes a clip from a scene. If they can showcase their character as well, that's super great!

> *Geoff wants to show that his* Pathfinder Chronicles *protagonist is an accomplished warrior. Geoff says, "Okay, you see Fytor standing with his back to a river, swinging his axe like this—whaaa swish-yeaaa—as all these orcs try to rush him. He's just chopping them down, left and right."*

> *The Producer asks, "What's something about these orcs that's visually recognizable, like maybe we see they're all part of a clan or something? Is Fytor guarding something or just killing these guys? Are the others in this scene?"*

> *"Uh, maybe they've got some red face paint?" Geoff suggests. "I think he's just killing these clowns. I guess Teef and Klerk can be there, too, but it's all about Fytor."*

> *"Are they fighting?"*

> *"Oh, no, they're knocked out. Fytor is the only one still standing."*

> *Perfect! We now know that Fytor is fantatstic at fighting. Orcs are violent and are wearing face paint—as we play, we might discover that orcs only wear face paint during raids or wartime, or that different clans wear different face paint. Either way, we might have a scene this episode that involves orcs with red face paint.*

Once every player has added a *Previously On…* scene, the Producer adds an additional scene, one that should lead straight in to tonight's episode.

> *The Producer finishes with a figure wearing a dragon's skull as helmet, standing atop a stone ruin. Blood-painted sigils across his chest, arms, face. In his right hand, a massive spear-like weapon. Behind him, a few dark-robed creatures. He's addressing an audience: "I swear to you! They will all bow before our might or—or they will burn!" The camera circles him and starts pulling out to reveal the massive army of followers: armed orcs, giants, and other foul creatures, all with the same red war paint on their faces, all joining in the chant. "Burn! Burn! Burn! Burn!"*

> *And now, on* Pathfinder Chronicles…

IT'S SOMEONE'S SPOTLIGHT EPISODE

The second thing necessary to make this a mid-season episode is to determine whose spotlight episode this is. To show off how screen presence really works, we give one protagonist a screen presence of 3 and one or two a screen presence of 1.

No way, Thomas, you're probably thinking. *That would completely hose the screen presence 1 protagonist.*

Well yes, you're right. Except we're in an episode in the middle of the season, which means there (theoretically) were earlier episodes. All protagonists, except the one whose spotlight episode this is, have saved Fan Mail from the last episode. Protagonists with a screen presence of 2 get two points of fan mail. With a screen presence of 1, your protagonist gets *five* points of fan mail (they had a great episode last week). As we play today's episode, the fan mail ecosystem will kick in like normal.

A NOTE ON FAN MAIL

When playing at a public setting, there is a good chance this is someone's first game of *Primetime Adventures*. Although you have talked about how fan mail works, during the first few scenes new players may be unsure about awarding fan mail. Your job is to keep the fan mail system going! If someone makes a comment that makes everyone laugh, or does something that is awesome in the game, make sure to point it out.

> *"That was awesome! I wish I could give fan mail out, but I can't. Does anyone want to give them fan mail for that?"*

That's all you need to say. By the second time scene establishment goes around the table, they should be comfortable handing out fan mail.

> *The key to being a good Primetime Adventures Producer is to remember that your feedback is the only feedback that has NO mechanical weight.*
> *—Jason Corley*

Also be sure to ask people holding onto fan mail if they would like to spend them. In our opening scene, make sure to ask the non-spotlight players if they'd think we'd get a better story if the protagonist in this conflict succeeds or fails—get them to pony up some fan mail! Remind them that they can throw down fan mail on both outcomes of the conflict. (But keep those cards separate!)

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION RULES

While Fan Mail is a really neat concept in the game, Audience Participation is possibly the most fantastic element of *Primetime Adventures*—and if you play *PTA* just at home games, you'll never get to experience how the game is enhanced by audience interaction.

A NOTE ON THE THIRD EDITION

There's a bit of a mistake in the third edition's rules for Audience Participation. It references "winning narration", but that aspect of the game doesn't exist in this edition. Earlier editions of the game had an element where the player with the high card had the authority to say what happened at the resolution of a conflict, but the third edition removes that aspect: you get to say what your protagonist says and does, pretty much at all times. This edition moves the game away from the writer's room model and more towards traditional roleplaying where a player's ownership of a character is the focus. However, everyone at the table (and watching the game) is welcome to suggest elements of how a scene shakes out.

Another genius idea from Jason: Have multiple tables run Primetime Adventures *at a convention or game day. When the audience gathers around the tables and finds themselves playing in the game, they can move from table to table, taking their fan mail tokens and using them in other shows. The audience is changing channels, your show is losing and gaining viewers. Who wins Sweeps Week? Whichever table has the most fan mail tokens from other tables.*

FILMED BEFORE A LIVE STUDIO AUDIENCE

When you sit down to play *PTA* at your table, you're playing the part of the writer's room, as well as the main cast. When you play *PTA* in public, anyone watching your game is literally part of the Audience. While your table is bouncing ideas off each other in the writer's room and having the scenes play out, the Audience is reacting on social media: message forums, livetweeting, and creating commentary and reaction videos. Because each member of the Audience gets one card to take sides in conflicts, it not only is the writer's room hearing what the show's audience wants to see happen, the game accommodates more players.

When I ran the first episode of *MCU: Gotham*, the "cops in Batman's Gotham City" game, at an open game day, four or five players sat at the table. A few other players who showed up later didn't have a game to play in (all players, no GMs), so they took up seats in a lounge area right nearby to chat and hang out. My friend Berin was in that group. He said it was great. There were some people who watched the *MCU: Gotham* game the whole time, dedicated viewers that were passionate about the show on the message forums. There were people who were just chatting and every so often paid attention to the show at the table, our casual viewers. And then there we some players who showed up, watched a bit, and left—we actually lost viewers.

Each time we had a conflict, we would hand out cards to the Audience. They would receive fan mail; they would hand out fan mail. (Getting fan mail from the Audience? Cool.) As the Audience becomes invested in the game, the players at the table become even more rewarded. Your show's protagonists' actions entertain more than the other players: they entertain an actual audience.

CAMEO APPEARANCES AND GUEST STARS

During those scenes were not all protagonists are present, I assign secondary roles to the players. We've got Jason's character meeting with the mob boss, who is very disappointed in his dirty politician's slowly-growing conscience. I pass control of the mob boss over to Kevin. What the mob boss does, what he says, and all of his mannerisms are created by Kevin. (The scene will probably end with Kevin ordering Jason's protagonist to kill Kevin's protagonist, which is *awesome*.)

These smaller roles can be given to the Audience members as well.

In the series finale of MCU: Gotham*, Batman finally made an appearance and the conflict was about one of the protagonists. Does she follow this guy or does she think he's a deranged lunatic? We had four players at the table, three audience members. As we handed out the cards to the Audience, each one delivered a Christian Bale throat-scratchy Batman line to convince the protagonist.*

NEXT WEEK ON… AND THE NEXT EPISODE

At the end of the episode, even if the game won't continue after this game day, do *Next Week On….* This final phase of the game is indirect feedback to your Producer role. Your players, when showing what they want to see in the next episode, may show you what types of scenes they want that you might not have focused on. Are they suggesting more scenes that were based on the plot elements introduced in tonight's episode?

After the entire episode where the protagonists were inside the arcology, Brian's Next Week On… *has his protagonist outside, in a dark alleyway, as a group of ghoulish gangers slowly advance. His protagonist is very much not the type of character that is good in a fight. This tells me that Brian wants more scenes where his protagonist is out of his element.*

After going through *Next Week On…*, explain that if the show continued to another game session we would work together to get those scenes in the show.

Take a breather, check the clock. If you still have time in your game slot, do a show of hands and see if anyone wants to continue with another episode. Also ask anyone standing around that was in the Audience if they would like to join in. If you are continu-

ing, give the player with screen presence 1 the spotlight this time. Ask if anyone would want to drop to screen presence 1 this next episode. Fan mail saved carries over!

If you have a new protagonist joining the show, look around at how much fan mail the others saved from the last episode. Average it out and give this new player that much, plus one extra. Create that new protagonist quickly by leaving that last trait empty for the player to fill in as the game is going and jump into the next episode!

Judd Karlman ran a Star Wars-*based* Primetime Adventures *series as a yearly event at Gen Con, starting in 2007. Although they ran a tight season at each convention, they continued the series over the next few years. Judd's game is just one example of how to take a memorable* PTA *series and have it revisited after a lengthy hiatus.*