



## Frog-Boiling For Fun And Profit: Adding Conspiracy To Your Game

*"If thou be'st not immortal, look about you: security gives way to conspiracy. The mighty gods defend thee!"*

-- William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, II:iii:4-5

They say that They boil frogs. Or, rather, Those who say things about Them say that They (Them, not Those) boil frogs. If this is the kind of thing you want your players to say, or if it's the kind of thing you want to say to your players, you want to run a conspiracy game. To do that, you'll want to boil your players like They (Them, not your players) boil frogs, in a bubbling broth of pronouns and all-concealing steam. Cooking directions follow -- so hop on in, the water's fine!

*"That was nothing. But, that's how it always begins . . . very small."*

-- Egg Shen (Victor Wong), *Big Trouble in Little China*

All that batrachian business is by way of analogy. If you want to cook a frog, you put him in a pot of warm water and turn up the heat a little bit at a time. The frog, who would hop out of the pot if you just tossed him right into boiling water, will placidly sit still and simmer to death as the heat increases by slow degrees. The parallel case in game design is the slow introduction of little elements, hints, connections, and so forth. By the time the characters notice How It All Fits Together, they're well and truly cooked. (A somewhat important note: Players aren't frogs. If the players keep hopping out of the water when it gets too warm, they don't want to play a conspiracy game. You can't make them, so don't try.) The "slow and sneaky" conspiracy game becomes a conspiracy game gradually, one piece at a time.

In general, then, start small and work up. Even if you've announced it's a conspiracy game already, this approach reflects the standard tropes of the genre. In addition to the usual missing documents, mysterious strangers, peculiar letters, odd graffiti, etc., the GM adding conspiracy to her game should connect in-game elements in inobvious ways. Have one character's contact in the ONI refer to another character's adopted brother. Plant clues at the scene of the burglary recalling an earlier murder the players thought was solved. In general, reach across [characters](#) or across "story arcs" for the sense of impending connections. In some games, this will just look like adding depth to the setting. Once you've spun a web that can withstand it, start putting in slightly bigger signs -- a black helicopter overhead, a significant tattoo on a "random mugger" or "wandering monster," or any of the rest of the [Conspiratorial Alphabet](#).

*"All I know is that this Lo Pan character comes out of thin air in the middle of a goddamn alley while his buddies are flying around on wires cutting everybody to shreds while he just STANDS there waiting for me to drive my truck straight through him with LIGHT coming out of his mouth!"*

-- Jack Burton (Kurt Russell), *Big Trouble in Little China*

Or, of course, you can just crash a flying saucer in their backyard. This "expanded scope" [nova](#)

technique works well if you want to unmistakably "announce" the sudden irruption of conspiracy into the game. If the players seem to object, go ahead and Scully it with some plausible explanation. In a "straight" espionage game, the UFO was an experimental aircraft. In a "straight" historical game, the document is forged, or the eyewitness is crazy, or both. If, on the other hand, they react with wide-eyed avidity and drooling glee, they've signed on for the boiling -- and you can have Operation Moondust steal their UFO wreckage, or the Inquisition arrest their informant, or a fire destroy the evidence. Now, the characters want to find out what's going on -- and, ideally, so do the players. You expanded the scope of the game by flicking the lights on and showing them a glimpse of the Truth. Then you turned out the lights and contracted the scope again, but the Truth remains Out There, an afterimage in the darkness. You can go back to building things up by tiny increments, only this time the players eagerly add every tidbit to their mosaic, trying to fit the puzzle pieces you dole out into that one vision of the Truth they had before you hid it from them. Players will often work harder to uncover the Conspiracy if they have some notion of what it's conspiring to conceal -- and once they're sure the Air Force is working for MJ-12 to conceal alien infiltration, you can throw another Big Revelation at the players ("the aliens are invading because they're fighting the Freemasons") and jump-start to the next level.

*"O conspiracy!*

*Sham'st thou to show thy dangerous brow by night,  
When evils are most free? O! Then by day  
Where wilt thou find a cavern dark enough  
To mask thy monstrous visage? Seek none, conspiracy;  
Hide it in smiles and affability ..."*

-- William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, II:i:86-90

So when should you put in conspiracies? In the Obvious Case, where you said "I'm running a **GURPS Illuminati** game," the answer may be "right away," or you may boil the frog slowly as normal, albeit with its consent. Players may also request added elements of conspiracy in an ongoing game, either out of game ("It would be cool if you put conspiracies into the game.") or in-game ("My character suspects that the Black Dragon Society is behind this seemingly-unrelated string of murders.") The GM may suddenly decide to add conspiracies either to spice up a game that's gotten a little predictable, to explain a game that's gotten bizarrely tangled, or to scratch an Illuminated itch.

Like most elements of worldbuilding, conspiracies normally begin with the GM deciding to put them in. For the creative, "think-on-the-fly" GM, this can be as simple as: "There's definitely something behind this, and I'll figure it out later." Other GMs start big ("The Greys and the Cabal are behind everything") and fill in the middle levels on an ad hoc basis. Still others follow the "Boskone model" where little conspiracies lead to bigger ones, which lead to global ones, which lead to global, millennia-spanning ones, which lead to global, millennia-spanning, pandimensional ones, which lead to ... The Boskone Model is one direction you can take the "expanded scope" game, or you can go "sideways" -- each conspiracy may not lead to a bigger one behind it, but (say) to a different one opposing it. The GM may either have worked all of this out in advance, or she may fill in each layer of the onion in only as the characters solve the previous one.

*"There's a spy in the sky*

*There's a noise on the wire*

*There's a tap on the line*

*For every paranoid's desire"*

-- Bob Geldof, "Someone's Looking At You"

Like many Secrets What Is Hid From Players, a courageous GM can easily pick the coolest-sounding player theory and make it retroactively true (or mostly true) ten minutes after the players bring it up. Let's say that the GM wants to subtly turn her Air Adventure game into a conspiracy game. She starts by dropping hints into ongoing adventures: a drunk in the bar babbles about a "guy in a silver shirt," a newsreel says that a World War Two ace died in a plane crash, Admiral

Byrd tours the air base, a mysterious heart attack grounds the blonde PC's rival. One or two mysterious "You don't know what's going on, get out while you can" type meetings with a trench-coated AFOSI type, and the players are all a-tizzy. Then, she sets the hook -- a test pilot's jet lands, completely empty, with snow in the cockpit interior. The GM thinks she's set up the [Antarctic Space Nazis](#) pretty well, a "Silver Shirt" fascist agitator seen nearby, an anti-Nazi killed, an Antarctic explorer shows up on mysterious business, a true Aryan granted a favor, and then the snow indicating a midair kidnapping by someone with snowy jackboots! The players, meanwhile, are buffaloed -- until one of them says something like: "I've got it! It's Shangri-La! The Lemurians wear silver robes, their pacifist ideology made them kill the famous warrior ace, Admiral Byrd knows the secret of the hollow earth, the heart attack was their psionic powers at work, and the snow is from the top of [Mount Shasta](#)!" That's so much cooler (and, more importantly, the players are charged up about it and on target for it) that our GM might very well change horses in midstream; the Conspirators gain an eye and move underground. If she wants to work the Nazis in, she can expand the scope when the PCs find a giant emerald statue of Hitler in the Tibetan monastery -- now the players know the Nazis have to be involved somehow, and they'll set themselves to looking for those clues.

*"The imaginary vastness and strangeness of the plot distracted people's understandings, and subverted every reason for reciprocal confidence. Besides ambition and cupidity, which were at first supposed to be the motives of the poisoners, they fancied, they even believed at length, that there was something of diabolical, voluptuous delight in this anointing -- an attraction predominating over the will. The ravings of the sick, who accused themselves of what they had apprehended from others, were considered as revelations, and rendered anything, so to say, credible of any one."*

-- Alessandro Manzoni, *The Betrothed* (1827)

The attraction of the conspiracy will depend, of course, on the coolness of the GM's idea, and on the players' desires. Some players demand only grim and gritty conspiracies; CIA Cubans killed Kennedy, and Exxon triggered the Gulf War. Some players demand only big magical conspiracies; John Dee and the court of Faerie are behind the UFO phenomenon, and the Greys killed Kennedy with a microwave beam from orbit. "Realism" in conspiracy gaming is much like "realism" in magic or fantasy; a matter of taste, not of fact. That said, it may suit in-game realism to have a conspiracy "guest star" and vanish. Let's say that in one *GURPS Old West* scenario, wherein the PCs meet John Wilkes Booth living under an assumed name in Tombstone, they discover that the Egyptian Freemasons killed Lincoln. They then go back to gunfights and Indian raids for the rest of the campaign. On the other hand, game tone may require a villain who can take a larger role, but can be defeated rather than take over the game. In that model, the PCs decide to travel back East, and after a few adventures, eventually go to England and, in a guns-blazing climax, deal out a little frontier justice to the Grand Lodge of Luxor-in-London. If the players still have their conspiracy jones, the GM can always crash a UFO on them when they get back to the good old New Mexico Territory, and we're off again in a cloud of dust and frog-flavored steam.

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