



## Let's All Go to the Movies!

Let's not waste any time this month. I'm late, you're impatient and we've got a lot of material to cover.

This month's column deals with a tricky subject: something we authors like to call "creative plagiarism." And before you get any funny ideas, consider the fact that Wee Willy Shakespeare is the God-King of this little practice. Bill stole the plots for almost all his plays, but the trick here is that he changed almost everything else. Like our friend Mister Lucas, he made "old stories in new costumes."

I'm gonna give you three plots from Hollywood films and show you exactly how to rip them off - - while keeping your dignity at the same time. Hold on to the safety bar, folks. We're going at top speed this month.

A few cautionary statements.

Pulling this off can be tricky. You've obviously got to have a good handle on your players and they've got to have a good idea that you're gonna do something like this. At least, they have to understand that when the campaign ends, not everybody gets out alive.

Now that we've got the preliminaries out of the way, let's get down to business.

### The Walking, Talking Time Bomb

One of the oldest stories in Hollywood involves a little plot device I like to call "The Walking Talking Time Bomb." As I alluded to last month, this little gem of an idea came to me from that marvelous film *Escape From New York*, directed by John Carpenter. I'm pretty sure I don't need to go over the premise with you; this is one of the standard staples in any gamer video library. Suffice to say that our protagonist - - a dubious anti-hero we know as "Snake Plissken" - - gets a tiny little bomb put in his arteries that'll blow up in the final seconds of the film. It's a mean little incentive to make sure Snake doesn't take off without completing his mission first. Well, this puppy has been used in a whole mess of films both before and after *Escape* hit the screens. From a plotting point of view, it helps a game master in three important ways.

1) It keeps the players on track. All too often, players have a tendency to wander off course. I'm not talking about railroading your friends onto a one-way plotline, I'm talking about when they start making Monty Python quotes, relating old war stories, stop for a minute to watch a cool music video, or pull out their *Magic* cards because they aren't the center of attention at the moment. When they find out there's a microscopic bomb in their arteries that's gonna explode in precisely 17 hours, 24 minutes and 16 seconds, they ain't gonna get distracted by nothing. They're *always* the center of attention.

2) It gives you a time limit. Ever take a timed test? Then you know the difference, don't you? Something happens when the professor tells you, "You have 45 minutes to finish this section of the test." You start economizing your time. You don't dally on questions you don't know the answers to. You start to sweat bullets when that 40-minute mark hits and you've only gotten through half the questions. Timed tests are supposed to do that. Timed games are exactly the same. The players don't spend a lot of time dallying with the bar maid. They don't spend a lot of time trying to sell off that helmet they took off the troll they killed ("It must be worth a couple of copper pieces!"). When they know they're gonna die in less than a day, everything suddenly becomes very important. Which leads us to our final very important way this technique helps you as a GM:

3) It's a test of character. I love that test in the second *Star Trek* film. (No, I can't spell Kobiashi Maru, and I ain't even gonna try.) "It's a test of character," Kirk says. Of course later we discover that he cheated to win, but that shows us something about Kirk's character, now doesn't it? You find out a lot about someone's character when they find out there's a bomb in their arteries ready to go off at any time. You strip away the veneer and get to look at the naked soul without any of its trappings.

There's one more important thing, but we'll talk about that one at the very end. First, I've got a scenario for you. A real juicy one, too. (Suddenly, I feel like the Crypt Keeper.) I call this one . . .

## The Mega-Corporation Just Put a Time Bomb In Your Head

(Did I mention I really suck at titles?)

I'd been running a *Cyberpunk* campaign for almost a year. It was time to draw things to a close. As I said before, I don't run open-ended games. I don't like comic books that run for 700 issues, I don't like sitcoms that run for 17 years where the characters never seem to change, and I don't like soap operas. I like stories, and stories have a beginning, a middle and an end. After a year, it was time to end the story.

My boys (there weren't any girls at the time) had been working for a Megacorp for a few months. What can I tell you, they sold out for the money. But, they figured they could run little black bag operations when the Megacorp wasn't looking; kinda biting the hand that fed them sort of thing.

This was a mistake. As we all know, the Megacorp is always looking. Too bad for them.

So, I let them know that the end of the campaign was on its way. They had one more week, and at the end of the following Thursday, the game would be at an end. My reputation preceded me, and they spent that Thursday preparing for World War

III. It didn't help.

At the beginning of the game, I put an old white egg timer on the table and set it for 1 hour. They asked me what it was for. I told them they'd find out soon enough. Then, I announced the game had begun and started the egg timer. I asked each of them where they were and what they were doing. Each of them gave me the expected answer and I sat back and watched. For an hour. I did nothing. Said nothing. Just sat back and watched.

When they asked questions, I answered them as quickly and expediently as I could. I didn't want to waste their time. But that first hour, they did a whole lot of nothing, waiting to see what was going to happen. At the end of that hour, the bell rang, I rolled a few dice, consulted a home-made chart and looked up at the Fixer. "Your head explodes," I told him. "You're dead."

His pencil dropped to the table like a piece of his brain hitting the floor.

Then, I reset the egg timer and sat back. Waiting.

That's when the questions started to fly.

To make a long story short ("Too late!"), they spent the rest of that time figuring out what was wrong with them. Turns out, a small nanotech virus was put in each of them. At the end of each game hour, the virus would activate in one of them, causing some sort of awful reaction. Each was different. The first one was a simple mind-bomb. The second one erupted into tiny flechette rounds that caused 1d10 wounds to everyone else in the room. As I reset the clock, they made a quick decision to separate in the final seconds to make sure whatever came out of the unlucky soul whose turn it was to detonate didn't harm any of the other players. The third was a weird kind of fungus bomb that sent spores out 100 feet in every direction. Nasty killer poison spores.

There were only two of them left after that. By then, they'd figured out that no amount of tinkering was gonna get rid of those bombs. They had to find the guy who made them and get him to do something about it. At around 3 hours and 47 minutes, they found out that the guy who commissioned the bombs was their contact at the Megacorp ("Surprise! Surprise!"). He found out about their black bag sabotage missions and decided to teach them a lesson. He had the antidote. And he was all the way across town.

Tick, tock. Tick, tock.

The fourth guy didn't make it in time. He exploded into napalm. The fifth guy, however, did make it. With two minutes to go. He burst into the villain's office, barricaded the doors and sat on the Corp's desk and put a huge, nasty gun in his mouth. I looked at the player standing in front of me, his hands in the pantomime gesture of holding a big, huge gun and saw the mad smile on his face. "I'm gonna detonate in less than two minutes," he said to the Corp. "I don't even know what's gonna happen to me. But I do know one thing. Whatever happens to me is gonna happen to you."

A perfect *Cyberpunk* ending.

\* \* \*

So what's the last little thing I mentioned above?

Every second counts. You and me, we're dying by the second. Right now. You've got a time bomb in your head and it's ticking down. You never know when it's gonna go off. You don't even get to see the egg timer. Every second counts.

\* \* \*

## How Terrible is Wisdom . . .

My buddy with the master's degree in film tells me that film noir isn't about murders, missing statues, femme fatales and cities without pity. Rob tells me that the whole theme of the genre (uych) is "Who am I?"

As the private investigator goes through the dirty city looking for answers, he's really looking for himself. Just as the above theme lets us take a look at the inner workings of a protagonist's soul, so does this kind of journey allow us to transform it. We start off with caterpillars and we end up with butterflies. The PI starts looking for a missing person and ends up finding himself.

Here's how it works.

The film I'm invoking is a nasty, bloody affair directed by the same guy who directed *Evita*. Of course, he also directed *The Wall*, and *The Commitments*. We're talking about Alan Parker, and the film is *Angel Heart*. (If you haven't seen this little gem just yet, you may want to skip down a bit. In other words, we're about to enter spoiler territory. The feint of heart may wish to skip this part of the ride.)

Harry Angel is a cheap private eye hired by a very rich fellow named Louis Cyphre to find "dance-band scumbag" crooner, Johnny Favorite. Angel's journey leads him on a dark path. He discovers Favorite was a real bastard, a dirty man with a black, sorcerous soul. By the end of it, our little nickel-and-dime PI finds himself in the middle of an unspeakable sorcerous crime.

Johnny sold his soul to the Devil and when it came time to pay up, he switched his soul out with a soldier's, thinking he could disappear, leaving the Devil with an unfulfilled contract.

Of course, you know where this is going. Johnny Favorite and Harry Angel are the same man. Harry's been looking for himself the whole time. And our buddy Louis Cyphre (masterfully played by Robert De Niro) was the one who sent him on the journey to begin with. There's a great quote from Oedipus (one of the oldest stories exploring this theme) at the end of it all: "How terrible is wisdom when it brings no profit to the wise."

The theme of the whole thing is clear. We have to be careful with wisdom. We have to make certain we're ready for it when it comes knocking on our door. Knowledge isn't always a blessing; sometimes, it's damnation. This is the key theme to *Call of Cthulhu*, but that's an easy out. Let's use it somewhere else. Somewhere players would never expect it.

## Heroes for Hire

For a very short time, I ran a *Marvel Super Heroes* game. This was long after my *Champions* days. The club I was running at loved the game, and asked me to run a campaign. Unfortunately for them, I knew a bit more about the Mighty Marvel Universe than they did. Okay, that's a lie. I knew a whole lot more than they did. I set them up as a freelance troubleshooting group. Kind of a "Heroes for Hire" trick. They liked it and we got on with the game. Their motto was a whole lot like the motto of the crew in *Deep Rising*: "If the money's there, we don't care!" This kind of attitude got them in a whole lot of trouble. Of course, they didn't see the trouble until it was much too late. Two quick examples.

They got hired by a representative of a foreign embassy to retrieve a stolen jewel. A large, multifaceted red jewel. Of course, they didn't ask any questions. In fact, they didn't even ask which embassy the guy was from. Turns out the jewel was stolen by a wealthy, unscrupulous collector. They trashed the guy, got back the jewel and returned it to its rightful owners: the Latverian Embassy.

Then they got hired by a large corporation to take care of a little embezzling problem. One of that corporation's side projects was developing weapons for the government. Seems these fellows were stealing secrets and selling them to undisclosed parties. While they never discovered who those parties were, they did bring the criminals to justice. They were very highly paid for their services - - by the Fisk Corporation.

More than a few of you already know what's going on. Our buddy Doctor Doom is the man who rules Latveria, and that red ruby is one of the Merlin Stones. The Doc needs 'em to go down to Hell and rescue his mom. A noble cause. Even if it means stealing stones from their rightful owners to complete his collection. And any fan of Spider-Man or Daredevil knows exactly who Wilson Fisk is. Unfortunately, my players only knew him by his nom de guerre: the Kingpin of Crime.

I pulled this trick a few times, and they never suspected a thing. Not until the Avengers came knocking on their door, that is.

\* \* \*

A group of heroes hired by a mysterious fellow. The path they walk leads to darkness. It's not the kind of darkness that Harry Angel finds, it's more of a candy covered darkness, but it still proves a point. Player ignorance is a powerful tool. Especially the self-inflicted kind.

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## Again and Again and Again . . .

Last story for the night. A lot of folks like calling this "The *Groundhog Day* Cheat," but that's not where I got it from. Granted, it's the most famous use of this little theme, but Bill Murray wasn't the first fellow to find himself trapped in a reoccurring nightmare.

You know the story. Bill has to live the same day over and over and over again until he gets it right. Specifically, he has to figure out how to win his true love's heart. Until then, he's stuck.

Well, the theme we're working with here worked for me rather well when I wanted to

get folks to play *Over the Edge* and they wanted to play *AD&D*. Some of you may remember that I covered that little ditty in the article "Deja Vu" written for *Shadis* magazine. In essence, the characters were reliving the same day over and over and over again, trapped in a loophole of time. But as soon as one of them died (a suicide in my case), he awoke naked in a canister of goo under the island of Al-Amarja, surrounded by the other players in the same kind of canisters. The death triggered a malfunction in the computers maintaining the fake reality and the rest of the characters awoken from their enforced sleep.

But that's not the theme we're dealing with here. What we're dealing with is a very difficult question to answer, even for folks who study it. What we're dealing with is the question: What is real? Movies like *The Matrix*, *The Usual Suspects*, and *Fight Club* are the best examples of this theme. But why would you throw it at your players? It's a tough curve ball to hit. I've often told people that the characters I've created for my games are more real than I am. After all, more people know about Bayushi Kachiko than John Wick.

It's one of my favorite themes. So many people only believe what they can perceive, ignoring the fact that because they're human, their perceptions are flawed. So much goes on in our world that we can't see, so much important stuff. On the other hand, we take a lot for granted. How does your clock radio work? How does your VCR work? How does the phone work? So much technology, and so few people who really understand what makes it tick. (Tick, tock. Tick, tock.)

What's real? Let's take a look at that little subject in a story I like to call . . .

## Self-Referential Awareness with a Lemon Twist

There are a whole lot of angles to this one. In short, it's letting the characters know that they're characters. Most folks learned this trick when they tried making themselves up as characters in their favorite system. (How many points are you worth in *GURPS* numbers?) Of course, soon after, they have to run a game with those characters. Are you a Thief or a Fighter? A Magic-User or a Cleric? (I'm a 4th Level Bard, myself. The new bard, not the Fighter/Thief/Druid kind.)

A few others learned it from the second edition *Over the Edge* RPG under the title "Self-Referential Awareness." The last time I did it, I ran it as listed. I just added little of a lemon twist to make it a bit more . . . deadly. It can be found on page 224. What it boils down to is revealing to your characters (not the players) that they're PCs in a roleplaying game. How do you respond to that kind of knowledge? What do you do with that kind of knowledge? Here's how I did it. You may want to do it a bit differently. (I should also repeat the warning found in *OtE 2nd*: Do not try this while your players are on psychedelic drugs.)

After a few months of running a *Chill* game, I hit them with the Deja Vu scenario. Their *Chill* characters woke up in *Over the Edge* with no memory of who they were or how they got there. They spent another few months figuring out their new environment. Finally, they were approached by a fellow who told them he could answer all their questions. They went to a dark warehouse, where the mysterious figure then gave each of them a copy of the *Over the Edge 2nd* book. He told them they were characters in a roleplaying game. Even showed them their character sheets. Finally, he showed them a room where five figures were tied to chairs with hoods thrown over their heads.

These, of course, are the characters' players. "And," the mysterious figure says to them. "The only way to be free - -"

That's when the figure gives them a gun.

"All your pain. All your suffering. All of it comes from them. They did it to you. They did it for fun. The only way to be free is to kill them. Only then, will your fate be yours. Until then, you're just pawns."

You should have seen the looks on their faces.

Did they pull the trigger? Sorry. I don't kiss and tell.

\* \* \*

*Scent of a Woman* through the lens of a fantasy game turns into a party of first-level adventurers finding themselves in charge of a blind 19th-level Fighter who wants one last "Huzzah!" before the curse put on him nine years ago hits him on the full moon of this month. *Last Action Hero* turns into a story of a **Feng Shui** character who suddenly finds himself in an **Unknown Armies** game, chasing after the Fu Manchu clone who plans on using his powers to wreak horror on the more "mundane" reality. And don't tell me that any GM worth his salt can't turn *The Usual Suspects* into a dynamite **AD&D** campaign.

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So. Here we are. At the conclusion.

They say imitation is the highest form of flattery. They also say that good artists borrow, but the best steal. Stealing ideas and telling them with your own voice is a time-honored storytelling tradition. Don't be ashamed of it. Find stories anywhere you can. Steal 'em without prejudice. Kurosawa did it with *Ran*, *Throne of Blood*, and *Yojimbo*. So can you. Of course, Kurosawa changed the matter to communicate it to his audience. So can you.

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