

Many roleplayers despise soap operas. "We get enough of the real world every day," they cry. "The last thing we want is more of it shoved down our throats for entertainment! Why do you think we play fantasy games in the first place?"

You can see their point. As with all speculative fiction, roleplaying allows us to examine the human condition objectively, to learn from mistakes our fictional characters make so that we may perhaps deal with adverse situations in our own lives a little better.

Hang on, though. Isn't that just what soaps are supposed to do? Some say films are better suited to comparison with RPGs. They are occasionally epic and are often based in fantasy worlds. Well, my Oxford dictionary has this to say about epic: "(Poem) narrating continuously achievements of some hero(es)". Provided you can accept Frank Tate as a hero, I'd say a soap fits this description better than *Braveheart*.


As for the fantasy setting, sure, most soaps are based in the real world, but everyone knows that no single council square could suffer as much mishap and tragedy as Albert Square, with one disaster piling on top of another. The world these characters inhabit is probably more fantastic than Middle-Earth.


But we willingly suspend our disbelief at yet another plane crash, or a long-lost love-child turning up out of the blue, not because we're gullible but because we know it will create conflict. And conflict is what excites us in both drama and roleplaying. Do we ever watch *Coronation Street* for 30 minutes of humdrum in which nobody has any problems? No. Do we ever see half an hour of Jimmy Corkhill twiddling his thumbs? Need I go on? And a quick word about *Star Trek*. Sorry, soap haters, but effectively *Star*

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Trek is a soap. So is *Babylon 5*, *Deep Space Nine*, *The X Files*, *Robotech* and *Dr Who*. They all feature the prime elements: a core of diverse characters, each with quirks; extraordinary events and coincidences; conflict between the characters' personalities and a focus on their personal relationships. That's why *Star Wars* was dubbed 'space opera'.

You may have already been inspired by some of the devices employed in these series, but let's break them down and see what we can steal - I mean learn.

 **Vampire:** *the Masquerade* has been made into a soap opera entitled *Kindred: the Embraced*. The Aaron Spelling-produced show has been dubbed *Vampire 90210* by fans.

 **It's not just TV companies that produce soap operas. The great majority of superhero comics face similar problems to soaps - because the series never ends, the heroes must face an endless sequence of ever-more threatening trials and challenges. X-Men is probably the best example.**

1. EXTRAORDINARY THINGS HAPPEN TO HEROES

They have to. That plane just *happened* to crash on *Emmerdale*; the Enterprise just *happened* to wander into the middle of a war at its peak. Make sure your PCs are where the action is. If they've unwittingly gone astray, bring the action to them (unless they're supposed to be detecting a trail). The PCs should always be at the centre of the action simply because we expect it. We are telling this story because it's interesting, so we are forgiven a certain amount of coincidence and convenient timing.

2. CONFLICT IS GOOD

How interesting would Max and Patricia be if they never bickered or disagreed? The last thing your party wants is for everyone to have the same attitudes. Perhaps the fighter (whose wife was murdered by an evil man-devil) worships a nature god and believes that destroying plant life for anything other than harvest is sacrilege. He and the wizard have a long-standing feud over the use of herbs in spells. Then the fighter discovers the only way to kill that man-demon is to cast a ritual spell on his sword using the energy from a 500 year-old oak tree. This is extreme, but hopefully you can see the potential for conflict.

SUIIS & SORCERY

Soap opera migseem an unlikely inspiration foreplayers, but as Antony Johnston covers, immersing yourself in bubblican produce some refresh ideas.

3. BACKGROUND


Or, what did you do before you were a trollsayer, daddy?

Character histories should never ever be skimped on. Some games come with a history generator (for example, *CP2020's* lifepath), and others make your history an essential part of character generation (for example, *Everway* and *Vampire!*). And this is definitely A Good Thing.

Experience, you see, maketh the man. Your character's background is invaluable to both you and your referee. It gives you much more of an idea about how your character will react in a given situation, what his opinions are and exactly how he formed them. It helps your referee allude to your past, to ensure that he can keep on making your character tick, and perhaps even set up meetings with old friends (or enemies, for that matter).

4. NO CHARACTER IS INCIDENTAL

Remember the new barber in Albert Square with his mysterious cellar and taste for humbugs? Stuck in your mind, didn't he? All it takes is one interesting twist on a stereotype, or one bizarre quirk stretched a little beyond the norm, and you have a character that will be remembered. Give

 **Contrary to a popular myth, soap opera writers are highly respected. The amount of plotting required to keep people watching day in, day out is formidable, especially combined with juggling all those characters in your head.**

your minor NPCs life - imagine a solo who shines his boots every minute he's not working. Quirks like this are great fun: when the PCs find that solo dead and wearing dirty boots, they'll know something sinister was afoot (sorry).

5. THE THINGS WE DO FOR LOVE

Eddie lost his house for it; Frank lost everything for it; and Don lost his foot because of it.

People sometimes follow their heart instead of their brain. Remember, you are trying to portray as real a character as possible, and real people have all kinds of different emotions. EMP shouldn't be the stat you shove anything that's left over into. Have principles, desires and standards. Dammit, fall in love! And if you're a referee, give your players someone suitable to fall in love with, even if it is only a stereotypical Ripley clone. Have them fall out of love from time to time, too. Affairs, gossip, scandal, jealousy, competition, manic fits of depression - this stuff is the mainstay of scriptwriters (especially Animé), and characters just can't get enough of it.

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6. PILE IT ON

Despite a soap's supposed realism, the problems of Jimmy Corkhill or Liz McDonald are probably many more than yours or mine, so keep at 'em. After Jezret the Valiant discovers he's Prince of the neighbouring realm he's been crusading against, let him discover his fiancé in flagrante with the low-life thief who cheated him out of his wealth three years ago. Then, on his way home, have him meet a long-lost childhood friend who has just finished his wizard's apprenticeship and is travelling to this land in search of the mystical Orb. Pile it on. Thick.

Take note of the amount of chance meetings which later become significant in soaps. See how minor characters are identified by just one or two quirks. And next time you come across the continuing exploits of a group of characters who encounter danger at every turn, where even major characters die and new ones are drafted in, ask yourself: is this a soap or a game?

