

Session Zero

Every new campaign begins with **session zero**, where the group gets together to prepare the game ahead. Picture this as the pitch meeting behind any big Hollywood product, behind-the-scenes in the writer's room. You're here to brainstorm, toss around ideas, ask questions, and build a collective vision for the campaign you're about to play.

This process may be a bit different than what you're used to: *Sword & Scoundrel* has no built-in premise, no default assumption about who the PCs are and what they are here to do. At the same time, the actual goal of play is both fixed and laser-focused: the players are here to declare their character's passions. Their characters are here to pursue those passions and the GM is here to test them. Together, we play to find out what happens and, in so doing, learn who the characters are when it matters most.

This combination of open premise and narrow focus makes the traditional approach to campaign preparation difficult, if not impossible. One cannot write a campaign and then have the players make their characters for it after the fact. The characters can't be made without reference to each other and the campaign they are meant to play. Each has to flow from the other. For this reason, the first time you get everyone around the table your mission is to set up the campaign ahead.

Session zero takes place in three phases: **The Warm Up**, **The Five Ws**, and then **Character Creation**. This process can (and likely should) take an entire session's worth of time, so get the most out of it. Have some snacks and drinks handy, get out a few notepads and pens. Take your time and enjoy the process.

Who Runs This Show?

Before we go any further, you need to decide who will take on the role of game master for this campaign. Often enough, you'll know this before session zero even comes up. If it hasn't been decided yet, now is the time. For the rest of this process, the GM will act as both master of ceremonies and creative director. While everyone will contribute ideas and help make decisions, the GM has the final word. After all, while the players will lay out the threads for the campaign ahead, it will fall on the GM to weave them together into something magic

Some GMs will come into session zero with strong ideas of their own. They might have a specific setting they want to play or a particular type of campaign they want to run. That's great! Just make sure to keep a loose grasp on the particulars. The campaign will ultimately end up being about whatever the players pursue, so make sure to leave plenty of room for them to mix in ideas of their own.

The Warm Up

The hardest part about doing anything is getting started. Even professional writers struggle to overcome the blank page. Instead of jumping straight into the campaign itself, take some time to warm up. Talk about media you like: books you've read, shows and movies you've watched, games you've recently played. Talk about what you liked in those stories and why you liked it. Branch out from there. Talk about genres you like, themes you enjoy, itches you've wanted to scratch or anything else you've wanted a chance to explore. Take your time with this part and enjoy it. Sometimes it's just fun to geek out about the things you love.

At the same time, it might also be worth taking some time to discuss things you *don't* want in your game. If you're uncomfortable with occult themes, say so. Maybe you're uncomfortable playing with real-world religions being used in

the setting, or some other historical baggage. Maybe you want to avoid certain adult themes. Whatever it is, this is a good place to talk about where your lines might be drawn.

Eventually, things will begin to coalesce. Talk long enough and you'll notice there are certain ideas that everyone responds to, themes that get everyone excited, common lines that run through the groups collective tastes and interests. Talk about those, too. Hone in on it and refine it. Somewhere in all of this, you'll start to have some strong ideas about directions for the game to come. That's when the actual campaign prep can begin, at which point we introduce...

The Five Ws

If you went to school in the English-speaking world, there's a good chance you're familiar with a set of interrogative words called "The Five W's" - *Who*, *What*, *When*, *Where*, and *Why*? These are not only the theoretical foundations of western journalism, they make a perfectly suitable structure around which to organize a campaign.

In Broad Strokes

As you're working through session zero, hold this advice sacred: *paint in broad strokes*. Start sketchy. Focus on concept, theme, feel, and atmosphere. Leave yourself great big creative voids to fill in as you go. Use the barest description you can manage to evoke the greatest range of possibilities. Don't get hung up on the fine details, you don't need to decide everything all at once. Flesh out only what you need to get started. Over time, you'll define the rest through play: the characters the players build, the passions they write, the actions they take, the choices they make, and the GM's responses each step of the way. The campaign will take on depth and color the same way as so much fantastic literature that came before, building on itself as revealed through the eyes and experiences of its protagonists.

Who, What (The Pitch)

This is often the easiest place to start, as it represents the most obvious questions to ask: who will we play and what will we do? This is the central conceit of the game ahead, the buy-in you're agreeing to around which everything else will be built.

Keep things simple and general at this stage, the answers don't have to be complicated. Details will emerge naturally as you go through the rest of the process. Right now, you're just looking for a quick one or two-sentence blurb to point everyone in the same direction.

- Crusaders on return from the Holy Land
- Imperial Intelligence, playing cloak and dagger spy games
- King's Musketeers, swashbuckling for honor, king, and country
- Monster hunters for hire
- Nobles engaged in house politics
- Ragtag mercenaries, looking for work
- Rebels in resistance to a tyrant king
- Rival fencing schools devolving into gang warfare
- Settlers on a savage frontier, carving out life at the edge of the known world
- Street criminals forming a gang to move up in the world

Throw out whatever comes to mind, especially where it circles back to the kinds of stories and media you were discussing earlier. Don't be afraid to steal shamelessly from the things you love. Borrow from real-world history, current events,

other fictional works or even campaign settings. Nothing is truly original anyway and the copyright police aren't going to come kicking down your door any time soon.

Again, spend some real time at this stage tossing ideas around. Keep at it until you find something that gets everyone excited, that sparks the group's imagination and enthusiasm. Nailing this part will make everything else so much easier.

When, Where (The Setting)

While the details can infinitely vary, a setting is at its heart a sense of time and place. This can be very literal and specific (*"Paris, 1626"*) or more broad and relative (*"I'm imagining a fantasy countryside dominated by ancient woods. Think, like, Grimm's Fairytales, with a Black Forest kind of vibe. Maybe we set it in a German Renaissance era analog?"*) Some of the setting may well be suggested by the pitch itself, but you aren't bound by these suggestions. Street criminals typically work best with an urban environment, but that could be any time in any place. Even the urban element is up for debate: your gang could be operating out of a small village, smuggling goods across the border. Playing King's Musketeers suggests a very specific time and place, but you could just as easily ditch France and port the entire concept to a fantasy setting of your own creation.

Don't be afraid to answer questions of time and place by analogy, appealing to other touchstones with which your group might be familiar. This is especially handy when mixing and matching ideas (*"What about a New World style setting, but the colonists are like viking-age norse types?"* or *"I'm imagining the War of the Roses... but with Dragons."*) Working in this way gives everyone some immediate imagery to play with and invites others bring their own knowledge to the table to add flavor and detail. Once you have some loose ideas in mind, you may consider some of the following questions to add a finer edge to the parts of the setting you need to get started:

- **How broad is your scope?** For some campaigns, all you need to develop is a single location: a small village, a single city. Other campaigns will be more sprawling affairs, with the PCs traveling across the country, continent, or even world. Get a rough idea of what you need to create up front and narrow down the scope of play as best you can. Don't worry about fleshing out the entire world right now. There will always be something over the next hill. Just focus on where the action begins.
- **What is the environment like?** A vast and endless desert suggests an altogether different set of images than gloomy woods or arctic wastes. For that matter, what is the starting location like? How urban, how rural? How densely populated? Do little villages dot the countryside or are settlements few and far between? How often or rarely do people travel? How safe is it to do so?
- **What are the people like?** How does the culture manifest itself through the people within? Brainstorm stereotypes and attitudes. Are they generally friendly and good natured? Suspicion of outsiders? Practical and enterprising? Grim and Fatalistic? Reserved? Hot-Headed? For that matter, is there one major culture in the area, or multiple ethnic or cultural groups? How do they interact with each other? What is the relationship between them? Not everyone will fit the mold of their culture (*especially* the PCs!), but playing in stereotypes and archetypes can help give character to the culture or cultures involved.

This list can go on and on, but this is a good place to get started. Develop the culture to the depths of the group's interest at the time and then move on. If you're having fun, keep going. If eyes begin to glaze over, move on to the next step. You don't need to have all the details worked out from the start. You'll build on them through play, regardless. Meanwhile, don't be afraid to revisit the Who and What. As you start to sketch out the setting, you may end up stumbling onto even more interesting ideas than those you'd started with.

Why

'Why?' is the most important of all the questions. Why are we playing? Why is the story happening *now*? That's where the PCs come in. Once you've settled on answers to the other four questions, jump straight into character creation. That's the next chapter. The choices you make there and the passions you write will give the GM everything they need to prepare for the first session and the game to start in earnest.