

Entanglements

A Story Mapping Tool for RPGs

Version 0.2

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Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Elements	4
Phases.....	6
Using the Finished Map.....	8
Specific Games	9
Reference Sheet.....	11

Introduction

This is a set of rules for use with most any role-playing game to help you build up a deeply interconnected set of characters. It is essentially instructions for making a “story map” that shows relationships between characters, places, events, and objects that will hopefully help provide the basis of an exciting campaign. It doesn’t replace the character creation system of whatever game you’re playing, but it will definitely influence the choices players make in creating their characters.

Credit Where It’s Due

The *Smallville Roleplaying Game* from Margaret Weiss Productions was the major source of inspiration for *Entanglements*. The group I was playing with (Aaron, Dave, and Grant) switched from *Smallville* to *Primetime Adventures* about halfway through the story, and I realized that the game had been greatly enriched by the elements we’d established in *Smallville*’s Pathways creation system. This is my attempt at a generic multi-system version of Pathways, with a few new things I thought would be interesting.

Aaron, Dave, Grant, and Bhroam provided some valuable feedback after our first attempt at using *Entanglements*, which is why this is version 0.2.

Preparation

Before you begin with *Entanglements* you should have some idea what your game is going to be about, and each player should have at least a basic character concept. A shared understanding of what you want the game to be is really important so that the elements the players pick will work with the intended setting and tone. In creating the story map, players have a lot of freedom to create or introduce characters, organizations, and situations, so it's important to be on the same page about what's suitable for the game.

You shouldn't have your character completed already—it will definitely inform at least some of the choices you'll make to create your character—but you'll need some idea where you're going in order to effectively choose elements for the story map.

If you're doing this in person you'll need a large piece of paper (or some other surface you can write on), and if you're doing it online you'll need some kind of shared drawing tool (such as the Drawing format in Google Documents). In either case you should expect this whole thing to take some time. I recommend setting aside a whole session for story mapping/character creation. That also means that *Entanglements* is intended for campaigns of at least moderate length (at least 5-10 sessions), and it's kind of a waste of time and effort to go through all this for a one-shot game.

Round Robin Setting Creation

Some of the best games to use with *Entanglements* are also ones where you have to come up with a setting on your own, and more RPGs than not require you to drill down a little into whatever setting they have before you can arrive at the basis of a campaign. An informal discussion can potentially drag on and land in quagmires, and a “round robin” process is one way to add some structure to this process while letting everyone contribute.

The idea is pretty simple: go around the table taking turns adding ideas to the game's setting until you have enough to go on. The ideas can be as simple (“There are airships.”) or detailed (“The U.S. government has secretly preserved each President as an eldritch steam-powered cyborg and Cyborg Lincoln is the true ruler of the nation.”) as you want, but the idea is to toss out neat ideas and riff on what the rest of the group is proposing. If the group finds the idea truly problematic you can ask that person to change it or come up with something else.

Mapping Tips

The story map you create in *Entanglements* can very quickly get complicated and confusing. Here are a couple of tips:

- If you have a small number of player characters, it can make life a bit easier to locate the circles representing them towards the outside of the map.
- If need be, you can put “warp zones” on the map. Put an Ⓐ in a circle in two places to indicate a jump, and then move on to Ⓑ and so on as needed.

Elements

The story maps produced using *Entanglements* consist of several different kinds of “elements.” These can be relationships, characters, assets, situations, etc., which I’ll explain in more detail below. How they relate to things on the character sheet heavily depends on the particular game you’re playing, but there most likely won’t be a 1:1 correlation between elements and actual character traits within the game. See p. 9 for some notes on applying *Entanglements* to specific games.

Elements by themselves don’t concern characters’ actual abilities, though they can *imply* a whole lot, and in story terms can help reinforce a character’s talents. Many archetypes (wizard, martial artist, etc.) imply a mentor or school that can be a secondary character or set, and a membership in an elite organization helps show that the character is in fact an elite.

Relationships (Lines)

Relationships are the connections between things, and thus they’re represented by lines between different elements. Each relationship should end up with a description written along the length of the line. These descriptions don’t need to be detailed, but they do need to explain what it is that joins the two elements together.

Examples: Business rivalry, has a crush on, uses for transportation, has terrible nightmares about

Secondary Characters (Squares)

Secondary characters are the people and other actors that take part in the story. These will become important non-player characters, and can range from valued friends to desperate enemies.

Examples: Classmate, Colleague, Lover, Parent, Sibling, Teammate

Situations (Triangles)

A situation is some kind of event or potential event that is important to the character(s) in some way, whether it’s a past event that shapes them, something currently ongoing, or a possible future problem.

Examples: Occupation, Pending Invasion, Pogrom, Power Manifestation, Questionable Experiments

Assets (Diamonds)

An asset is something in the world connected to the character. Assets connected to your character aren't necessarily assets her or she can actually use—assets cover plenty of things that could be adversarial to or simply desirable to a character—so make it clear in the relationship description what your connection to the asset actually is. There are four different kinds of assets: extras, organizations, props, and sets.

Extras

Extras are minor characters that make themselves useful to a character in some way. Unlike secondary characters, relationships with extras are largely pragmatic. They can be contacts that provide information or services, or just flunkies at a character's beck and call. Extras can include a group of people, such as a squad of soldiers, who mostly act as one in the story.

Examples: Alchemist, Doctor, Gadget Guy, Servant, Scholar, Security Team, Scientist, Soldiers

Organizations

Organizations are established groups of various kinds. Depending on the scope of your campaign this could range anywhere from a powerful government to a school club. Think about how your character relates to a given organization.

Examples: Army, Corporation, Government Agency, Religion, Research Facility, Secret Society, Thieves Guild

Props

A prop is an object of major importance to the story. It is most likely a MacGuffin in the classic sense; a thing that the characters desire enough for it to help drive conflicts.

Especially in games where items are a major mechanical element, keep in mind that a prop element doesn't necessarily mean a character gets to possess some particularly powerful thing. A sword that people would fight wars over might not have the slightest hint of magic on it if it's got the right history behind it instead.

Examples: Autographed Baseball, Crown Jewels, Legendary Sword, Magical Key, Special Formula, Suitcase Everyone Wants, Vial of the Z Virus, Vitaly Important Data Crystal

Sets

Sets are places of significance to the characters. A set can be a place they specifically own or control, or just a place that is somehow significant to their affairs. A team's secret base, the bar a character owns, and a pizza place where they hang out can all be sets.

Examples: Bar, Bowling Alley, Café, Mansion, Military Base, Newspaper, Restaurant, School, Store

Phases

When you use *Entanglements*, the players are going to go through a series of “phases” that represent different periods in the characters’ lives. Different characters’ phases don’t necessarily correlate in time (so a 200-year-old elf and a 2-week-old robot could still go through the same number of phases if it comes to that), and instead represent more the thrust of their formative experiences and entanglements. On the other hand, if your game is based around several pivotal events, you could deliberately make each phase correspond to a particular time period.

The number of phases the group goes through will determine the complexity of the resulting story map and how long it will take to create. As a rule of thumb, I recommend doing 5 phases on average. The table to the right has a suggested default pattern of phases, but of course you can customize it to your tastes. We’ll get into the types of phases below, but I recommend having the first and last phases be Major Phases.

Phase	Type	Title
0	Setup	Setup
1	Major	Origin
2	Normal	Early Development
3	Meta	Branching Out
4	Normal	Stumbling
5	Major	Turning Point
6	Normal	Aftermath
7	Meta	Profession
8	Normal	Aspirations
9	Major	Destiny

Before you get into the normal phases, you’ll need to place the players’ characters on the map. For each PC, draw a circle with the character’s name in it. Draw two lines between each of the PCs, representing their relationships with one another.

Taking Turns

It isn’t absolutely necessary to have the players take turns adding elements to the map, but it can make things less confusing. For each element allowed in a phase (Major and Meta phases have two each), go around the table once letting each player add their element.

To keep up a bit more variety, players cannot use the same shape twice in a row.

Types of Phases

There are three types of phases—standard, major, and meta—that work a little differently in terms of what kinds of elements players get to put in.

Standard Phase

During a standard phase each player gets to add one new element. You can add a character, asset, or situation and draw a line from it to your character, or just draw a line from your character to an existing element.

Major Phase

A “major phase” is one that represents a major turning point in the characters’ lives. During a major phase each player adds two new Elements instead of one, but otherwise it works like in a standard phase. Roughly one out of every 3 phases should be a Major Phase.

Meta Phase

A “meta phase” is a phase where players also get to play with other aspects of the story map. In addition to adding one new element like in a standard phase, each player gets to do one of the following:

- Draw a line between any two non-PC Elements and define a relationship between them.
- Destroy a line between their PC and a given Element and add a new element and relationship. This implies that something happened to sever one relationship and foster another.
- Introduce an element/relationship to another player character. The other player gets to define the nature of their characters’ relationship with that element however.

Roughly one out of every 4 or 5 phases should be a Meta Phase.

Does the GM Get a Turn?

Assuming you’re playing a game that calls for having a Game Master, it’s up to you to decide whether the GM will actually be adding things to the story map. Chances are the map will be more than sufficiently large and convoluted with just the players adding to it, but if as the GM you want to have some creative input into the whole thing you can simply fill in stuff on each phase as per a player, adding new Elements that relate to the PCs and NPCs. The only difference is that as the GM you don’t have a character of your own, and thus aren’t limited to elements that connect to a given character.

Using the Finished Map

The story map will provide you with a whole lot of ideas, but it will still take some a little thought to fully flesh out the story.

Triangular Relationships

One key thing to look out for on the story map is places where multiple characters have conflicting relationships with a given element. The classic love triangle is an obvious example, but anything where relationships are at odds is a potential place to make things more interesting.

Wedges

Whoever's job it is to drive the conflicts in the game, they can look at the story map and look for places to drive wedges, to threaten and generally mess with existing relationships. If there's a triangular relationship, look for something to exacerbate it. Even if a relationship is non-triangular, you can find interesting ways to mess it up.

Implied Elements

The story map can cover most of the major elements that will go into the game, but it can't really be comprehensive. An organization will have leaders and members, characters will have other characters around them, locations will have any number of people associated with them, and so on.

Late Additions

For any number of reasons you could find yourself needing to introduce new player characters after the fact. You may need to update the map to reflect things that have changed in the game, so go ahead and do that before a newcomer gets started. The simplest way for a player with a new character to go about things is to just run through the same phases as for the original PCs. That will give them plenty of opportunities to give their character ties to existing elements, as well as to add some new ones.

It's up to you whether you want the new PC to start off with relationships with all of the other PCs. Sometimes this will make perfect sense, and other times it'll be tricky to pull off, so you may want to have a new character start without relationships with other PCs until the player draws them in (though in that case you may want to give them a couple extra element choices).

Specific Games

This section discusses a few specific games that you might use with *Entanglements*, though of course there are plenty of other possible ones you might use. It would be problematic to use with a game that already has a lot of front-loaded story/relationship setup, and it's at its best when it can help a game with a more freeform setup process.

Dungeons & Dragons

It's best to figure out your character's race and class before you begin using *Entanglements*, but not too much else. Classes will often imply a lot of possible elements—clerics are part of a religion, wizards learned magic somewhere, etc.—even if you decide the earlier phases represent things that happened before the character took up that class.*

Character things like feats, prestige classes, backgrounds, and themes (depending on the edition or flavor of the game you're playing) can reflect the elements on the story map. You might go as far as to set specific trait choices in specific phases too; in a paragon tier 4th Edition I might ask the players to make selections for their characters during the different phases like this:

Phase	Type	Title	Trait Selection
0	Setup	Setup	Race
1	Major	Origins	Background 1
2	Normal	Apprenticeship	Theme
3	Meta	Development	Background 2
4	Normal	True Calling	Class
5	Major	Destiny	Paragon Path

In a 3.5 Edition/Pathfinder campaign I might simply have each phase correspond to a class level instead.

Magic items tend to be a big deal in D&D, so it pays to remember that a prop element is not the same thing as a magic item in the conventional sense. A magic orb that can resurrect the demon god needn't be anything special while in the hands of a player character, or what serves as a level-appropriate standard magic item selection could turn out to be a prop with greater story significance.

FATE

If you're familiar with FATE, it should be pretty obvious that the elements you create in *Entanglements* should very strongly correlate with your character's aspects. As usual, aspects require a certain finesse to write, and while your character's elements will strongly suggest several, you're still going to need to put some thought into how to make really meaty aspects out of them.

For *Spirit of the Century* in particular, there's the question of what to do with the game's existing phases of character creation with the nifty thing about characters' novels. Since it already has 5 phases, you could do it at the same time as *Entanglements*, letting the novel titles inform your choices of both map elements and aspects.

* This is also true of games like the various World of Darkness titles, where there are strong archetypes that say a tremendous amount about a given character.

Fudge

If you're using one of the basic forms of Fudge, you can simply let map elements inform how you pick skills, gifts, and faults. For something a little more interesting, you can integrate *Entanglements* into the game a little more directly. Make map elements correlate directly to appropriate gifts and faults, and let characters assign one or two traits of another kind (a gift, fault, or a skill/attribute of a given rank) in each phase. If you're using the 5-Point Fudge system, you could have players assign one of their points during each phase, and then assign skills according to the point totals that remain at the end.

GURPS

GURPS has a number of character traits that you can base off of elements from the plot map. Only certain kinds of relationships with other characters will count as Advantages or Disadvantages (such as Allies, Enemies, and Dependents), but most asset elements will make good character traits of some kind.

This advice is equally applicable to similar traditional point-buy systems such as *Hero System*, *Open Core*, *Big Eyes Small Mouth*, *Open Versatile Anime*, etc.

Maid: The Role-Playing Game

I'm playing favorites including it in here, but supposing you did want to do a relationship map to go with your *Maid RPG* game, I suggest rolling up characters first, then putting in both the maids and the Master during the Setup phase.

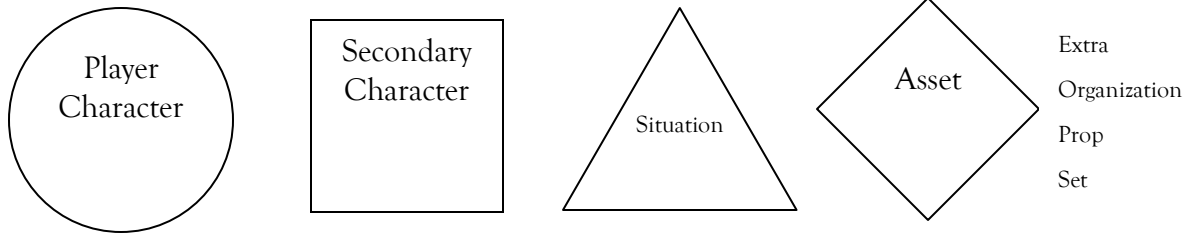
"Roll Your Own Traits" Games

There are several games where the players get to write up their characters' traits however they want. These include *Primetime Adventures*, *Risus*, and *Wushu*, amongst others. As usual story map elements can't map directly to character traits, but will often strongly suggest them. For example, a Set Asset on the story map will make a good candidate for a character's Personal Set in *Primetime Adventures*.

Also, the *Risus Companion* by S. John Ross* is an excellent resource for any of these kinds of games. One key bit of advice from it is that when you're making up traits you can make them more awesome by adding more specific and flavorful adjectives to them. When it comes time to look at the story map for ideas this is handy to keep in mind because it means you can take several different map elements and combine them into one trait.

* <http://www222.pair.com/sjohn/risus-companion.htm> (a steal at \$10!)

Reference Sheet



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