

Questing for Something

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Quests, whether simple scavenger hunts or fully scripted LARP-style theatre in the round, can add a certain magic to an event, particularly if the subject ties in with any overarching theme for the event. They provide a means of adding theatricality, even at a relatively low level, as well as educational opportunities or a means of enhancing an event theme (or both).

For me, some of the most memorable moments in the SCA have happened at quests:

- being chased through a dark park by a scary giant (yes it was someone who could run on stilts, but they'll always be a giant to me)
- hearing the clang of a hammer and coming round a corner to the magic sight of a lantern-lit island housing Wayland the Smith
- seeing a wolf talking with the King, and an eagle change into a man

Structure

What is the theme of the quest? Check period sources for ideas for plots or take elements from stories or poems. It can help to use known tropes, characters or quotes to make your quest world familiar to your players. Get a general feel for what you want your quest to cover, where/how it starts and finishes and how it can best be structured to suit the story and your aims.

Linear (structured to work from A to B to C): probably most common type

Pros: simplest to develop as it is based on a plotline or narrative that defines the structure and moves the story

Cons: frustrating if questers get stuck and can't progress; limits the possibility of multiple winners

Radial (structured to work from a central starting point to a number of goals)

Pros: allows different paths to operate simultaneously; caters for differing capabilities

Cons: if a final endpoint is desired, you have to have a way to bring people back together

Or mix it up a bit. Think about how the story should unfold and keep the progression logical/consistent (players will complain if things seem too arbitrary). The beginning and end points are likely to be the easiest to define, with the rest of the structure supporting how the questers get there and what you need to do to achieve that.

Cast

You're not likely to be able to rely on time for pre-event rehearsals, so it helps to draw up the storyline with set characters or personalities in mind which can be readily explained to your cast. Bear in mind who you want as cast members and try to ensure that you cast them to play to their strengths/character. If you don't have a set/reserved timeslot for the quest, it helps to take advantage of places they would normally be, or things they would normally be doing.

Character notes (max one page!) can help to give your cast members an idea of:

- their place in the context of the quest eg hero, villain, helpful by-stander, official, ranking individual, revealer of information, distraction (in turn, this will help the players know how they should react to the character and how they might help them move through the quest)
- prompt lines: those items of information or interactions necessary to advance the story; incidental useful information to reward good questers; misleading/irrelevant information (bear in mind the things your cast members *shouldn't* know too – the simplest approach is not to tell them); be sure to identify what are the most important points or characteristics

The Quest Environment

Questers tend to be generous enough to play along with the quest environment – people will understand that a kid's playground represents a mighty fortress; a piece of fabric is really an impassable river, but you need to be sure to tell them! Weave the story into the surroundings and take advantage of any physical elements you use in the context of the quest. The same holds for props and the more unusual cast roles (eg giants, dragons, trolls and the like). If you get the chance, darkness provides a great setting for a quest – it does add certain logistical difficulties, but the willingness to suspend disbelief is much greater when the mundane is hidden.

You may have some quest resources which are limited. This could relate to things such as certain items which questers have to find; or the availability of cast members for certain scenarios. To avoid frustrating your questers, try to make it clear when these are available, and when they are not. Or design the scenario such that there are multiple chances for encounters or numbers of items so that you can move more than one group on.

Starting Point

What's a good way to start off your quest? How do you draw people in?

Find a relevant or interesting way to bring people together. The announcement of a scavenger hunt will see people assemble to get the scavenger list; but you can dress that up with some theatre – an inciting incident - to open and set the scene eg:

- a dramatic performance such as a play or a puppet show; a reading
- a slice-of-life reveal: eg discovery of a murder, reading of the will, arrival of a traveller with a strange tale to tell

Way Points and Reveals

It pays to keep an eye on how the quest is progressing – what way points have been reached? Are people stumped over the same clue/element? Is a major point/path being ignored or misunderstood?

Give yourself the option to introduce new characters or release new information to help questers if you need to. Don't be afraid to step in and tweak things if you see the need to move things along.

When plotting out a quest, have an idea of what things need to happen and, if relevant, in what order. Way points are set situations or actions which help towards achieving the ultimate goal. They can give you, as the quest director, an idea of how the questers are progressing, especially in linear quests. Reveals are set situations or actions which provide additional information at a specific time or when prescribed conditions occur. These can be useful to spur flagging interest, extend the amount of time the quest runs, or otherwise control pacing.

Way points and reveals can involve all sorts of situations:

- information seeking: interacting with the cast or with each other
- conflict: physical/mental via challenges, puzzles to be solved; actual combat of some form
- item acquisition: for achieving victory conditions or progressing to another way point (if the latter, be wary of bottlenecks or choice limitations)

End Point and Victory Conditions

It helps a great deal to have a set end point which is clearly explained to questers so they know what they need to do and by when. The victory has to be attainable by the average quester -- make it too easy or obvious and the quest is over very quickly; make it too hard and you'll run out of time or (worse!) people will get bored and stop playing.

The quest may be declared over when the victory conditions are met by the first person/group to reach the conclusion. But you'll make it more enjoyable if you can provide a means for multiple people/groups to get there. Think about how you can draw people back into one group towards the end so that a suitable denouement can occur – you don't want a bunch of questers off at the other end of the site wondering where everyone went.

With a bit of thought, you can make magic.