

APPENDIX II: TROUBLESHOOTING GUMSHOE

Though most players find GUMSHOE simple and straightforward, we've heard from a few folks who've had trouble assimilating it. Usually this happens when they see that it's a little different from the roleplaying rules they're used to, and then assume that it's even more different than it really is. Here are the questions we tend to get from players as they grapple with GUMSHOE, along with the answers that helped them make the adjustment. Use these to guide any of your players who haven't yet had the cartoon lightbulb of recognition appear above their heads.

Doesn't the game railroad the players down a single path?

No more so than any other investigative game in which the players attempt to unravel a mystery whose answer the GM has determined in advance. (Nor do you have to determine it in advance, as you've seen from the notes on improvised cases on p. 225.) If the only source of narrative branches in a scenario is the possibility that the PCs will fail to understand what's going on, it's already a railroad. For this reason, GUMSHOE actually allows you to see the clue path more clearly and construct it to avoid single-track plotting. You do this by ensuring that there are multiple paths to the eventual solution.

In many instances, the feeling that players enjoy freedom of decision-making matters more than the actuality of your plot diagram. A story replete with chances to fork the narrative in unexpected directions may feel like a railroad if the players feel pressured or constrained. Conversely, a single-track plot might feel free and open if they feel that they're forging ahead and you're scrambling to keep up with them. When players feel hemmed in or see only one undesirable way forward, the GM may need to point to their various options, showing them that they're not being railroaded.

Won't the players just rattle off all of the abilities on their character sheets every time they enter a scene?

No more so than in a game where you have to roll against your abilities to get information. Players who imagine this happen are assuming a much greater difference between the traditional style and the GUMSHOE approach than actually exists. In each case, players always have to describe a logical course of action that might lead to their getting information, directly or indirectly suggesting the ability they use to get it. In the traditional model, there's a roll; the GM supplies the information on a success. In GUMSHOE, this step is skipped—but it's the only step skipped.

Traditional style:

Player: I scan the area for unusual energy signatures.

GM: Roll Energy Signatures.

Player: I succeed.

GM: You detect a harmonic anomaly on the quantum level—a sure sign that Xzar technology has been used here, and recently.

GUMSHOE style:

Player: I scan the area for unusual energy signatures.

GM: [Checks worksheet to see if the player's character has Energy Signatures, which she does.] You detect a harmonic anomaly on the quantum level—a sure sign that Xzar technology has been used here, and recently.

In neither style do you see players grabbing their character sheets as soon as they enter a new scene and shouting out "*Anthropology! Archaeology! Botany! Cybe Culture! Evidence Collection!*" They don't do this because it would be weird, boring, and stupid—and because in neither case does



it fill all the requirements necessary to get information from a scene.

The only difference is the lack of a die roll. It has a big effect on play, but that doesn't mean you're suddenly taking the express train straight to Crazytown.

What if the players come up with a different way to get the information than the scenario specifies?

Give it to them. GUMSHOE always provides at least one way to get clues into player hands. Reward player creativity when they find others. Disallow this only where it:

- ▶ pushes aside another player who ought to be able to use an ability he's heavily invested in to get the info, and who would be upset to see his spotlight stolen
- ▶ makes no fricking sense whatsoever

In the latter case, work with the player to suggest a more plausible means of using the proposed ability to acquire the clue in question.

In some cases, an unorthodox ability use might require a spend or trigger some negative consequence in the story. In general, though, GUMSHOE is about allowing access to information, not disallowing it. The default GMing style handed down by oral tradition from the hobby's early days trains us to be on the lookout for actions to disallow. GUMSHOE works best when you always look for ways to say yes.

How hard should I hint if the players are floundering?

As much as you have to, and (ideally) no more.

The barrier we traditionally erect between player autonomy and GM intervention is like any other roleplaying technique—it's useful only insofar as it makes our games more enjoyable. In GUMSHOE or any other system, frustrated players are generally happy to be nudged back on track, even if you use techniques that would otherwise seem intrusive. Hint as unobtrusively as you can, but hint all the same. When possible, disguise your hinting by using the mechanisms the game provides you. In this case, use your Investigative Ability Worksheet to find an ability that would logically provide the insight needed to see past the current roadblock. Then narrate it as if the character who has the ability has had a hunch or breakthrough:

- ▶ *"Suddenly you remember the phrase your Forensic Accounting professor kept hammering into you: follow the money!"*

- ▶ [Industrial Design] *"Maybe it's the engineer in you, but you can't help thinking there's something about that schematic you missed the first time around."*
- ▶ [Interrogation] *"It occurs to you that maybe it's time to take somebody into custody and ask a few tough questions."*

The extent to which you subtly usher the players along is also a pacing issue. What seems intrusive and railroad in the middle of a session may feel satisfyingly efficient as the clock ticks down toward the end.

What are the common causes of player floundering?

Stopping to ask why players are stuck is the first step to hinting them out of their conceptual paralysis. A few common syndromes lie behind most floundering incidents:

Problem: Someone already came up with the right, simple answer, but it was dismissed or forgotten.

Solution: Tell the group that they've already considered and dismissed the right answer.

Problem: The group is stuck in endless speculative mode.

Solution: They need more information. Remind them of this basic investigative principle.

Problem: The group knows what to do, but is too risk-averse to proceed.

Solution: Tell them to nut up. That's why they get paid the bigreds.

What if players over-investigate every little detail?

Expect players to surprise you by applying their investigative abilities to tangential descriptive details. For example, as the players explore a palace on a Tudor synthculture world, you might mention that a medieval-inspired tapestry hangs over a wooden throne. The core clue is a residue of alien protoplasm on the bottom of the throne. You mentioned the tapestry simply to add another evocative detail. Now your players are asking you what's on the tapestry, whether it's antique or modern, and whether the star pattern shown in its sky tells them anything.

A useful clue that dovetails with the episode's central mystery might occur to you here. If not, though, you can still treat this as more than a null moment to be quickly dismissed. Instead, treat tangential queries as opportunities to underline the characters' competence, while at the same time signaling that they have no great relevance to the case at hand. You can do this simply with a "no big deal" tone of voice or body



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language, or you can spell it out explicitly.

- ▶ [Astronomy] *"You can recall a thousand star systems from memory, and can say right away that the pattern of stars is just an arbitrary pattern chosen by the artist."*
- ▶ [History, Human] *"The images depict an idealized image of Henry VIII—exactly what you'd expect from someone who didn't bother to delve into the actual history."*
- ▶ [Chemistry] *"What's it made of? The usual synthetic fibers, exactly as you'd expect."*

What if the player actions suggest a clue that isn't in the written scenario?

This will happen all the time. No scenario, no matter how tightly written, can provide every answer to the questions players will use their abilities to ask. When this comes up:

1. Using your knowledge of the scenario's backstory, think up the most logical answer to the question.
2. Pause to make sure that your answer doesn't contradict either the facts needed to supply the solution to the ultimate mystery, or any of the core clues along the way. If it does, modify it to fit the rest of the mystery.
3. Supply the info. This might lead to new scenes and alternate ways of gathering the core clues. Improvise as needed to keep up with player actions.

Doesn't the clue structure make the game hard to prepare for, or to run on the fly?

It's true that good mysteries are hard to plot, in roleplaying or in other media. You have to be able to plot in two directions, creating both a logical backstory that makes sense when reconstructed, and (as a bare minimum) at least one logical path for the investigators to follow when unraveling it. However, if you keep the backstory reasonably simple, you can rely on the players to provide all the complications and red herrings you need. With this in mind, preparation for a game session can be as easy as jotting down a few point form notes sketching out the backstory and scene structure. Provided you keep the basic details and story logic straight in your head, this very basic structure makes plotting easier, not harder.

In this case, you're in luck: space opera conventions mean

that Ashen Stars mysteries can be simpler than those in police procedurals or horror games.

In my group, we never see the game ground to a halt on a missed information roll, so why play GUMSHOE?

Play it because it focuses and streamlines play, eliminating the elaborate workarounds your GM has to use to make the missed information rolls invisible to you. It replaces these moments of circular plotting with more interesting scenes that move the story forward.

Optional Rule: No-Spend Investigative Spends

Although most groups enjoy the investigative spend rules, a few have reported problems with them. Some players find that the need to ask for investigative spends intrudes too much on the illusion of fictional reality, or makes it too clear that there are certain actions they ought to take during particular scenes.

Here's another method of providing the flavor clues available through investigative spends, for groups that prefer it. This optional rule is equally applicable to all GUMSHOE games. Be aware that, like most optional rules, this imposes a trade-off you should be aware of before implementation. In this case, the GM takes on a greater bookkeeping burden in exchange for making the system more transparent to her players.

Before play begins, the GM checks all character sheets for investigative abilities with a rating higher than 1. She compiles a master list, arranged per ability, ranking the characters in order of their ratings.

Graz Prister has Downside at 4. Clementine Heidegger has it at 3, and Arno Black at 2. The entry in the GM's master list looks like this:

Downside

*Graz 4
Clementine 3
Arno 2*

Players alert the GM whenever they add to their investigative abilities, so they can keep the master list up to date.

Whenever the PCs enter an investigative scene in which a spend is available, the GM checks the master list to see if any of them could afford to make the spend. The first time this



happens, the GM chooses the topmost character, and puts a number of ticks next to the name equal to the size of the spend. During subsequent scenes in which a spend can be made in the same ability, the GM chooses, from among the PCs whose ratings equal or exceed the spend, the one with the fewest tick marks. The tick marks do not represent expenditures; under this system it is possible for a player with 2 points in a particular ability to get two or more 2-point clues, if no one else in the group qualifies to earn them.

This approach doles out the flavor clues in a way that favors players who've invested the most points in any given ability, but hides the mechanism from them, so they can't see the plot gears in motion. It also tends to result in the revelation of more flavor clues.

The PCs are interviewing a witness, a hollow-eyed spaceport hanger-on named Lou. The scenario notes say that on a 1-point spend, a character with Downside will know the meaning of the decorative glowing subdermal implant that Lou wears on his left wrist. You, the GM, check your master list for Downside, and see that no spends have been made against it this scenario. So the highest-ranked character with the least tick marks is Graz. You describe the implant and tell his player: "The

bracelet indicates that he's a timestooge—a dupe of a bogus nufaiith run by con artists pretending to be temporal travelers."

Two scenes later, another opportunity for a Downside spend comes up. This is for a 2-point spend, to know that the radiation scars on the arm of a witness were probably put there by the notorious smuggler who loves to brand enemies with a jury-rigged weapon. You check the list, which now looks like this:

Downside

Graz 4 ✓
Clementine 3
Arno 2

Graz already has a tick next to her name, so Clementine gets this clue. You then put two tick marks next to her name:

Downside

Graz 4 ✓
Clementine 3 ✓✓
Arno 2

The GM can either start fresh with no tick marks at the beginning of each scenario, or continue the existing list from one case to the next.