

Story Citadel Postmortem: Pepper Knave

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Pepper Knave: Creation Process

I started my creation process with a blue-sky brainstorming session. Because we just had the puzzle lecture in Jesse's class I first thought about puzzles and puzzle types that I admired and wanted to use. Before long though, I found myself running through images and scenes I wanted to give to my players, and my brainstorm branched out into settings and characters I wanted to use.

Directed Brainstorming

It quickly became clear that I was favoring an adventure along the lines of *The Neverending Story* or *Spirited Away*. I liked the idea of avoiding genres I'd heard a lot about in tabletop RPGs: D&D fantasy, espionage, cyberpunk, far-future, Lovecraftian horror, superhero, western. And while "kid enters bizarre fantasy world, saves enslaved children" isn't exactly original, the diverse styles of these stories allowed me to easily color it in a different way.

One of the images that came to me early was that of a stoic silver-skinned figure, a nonthreatening figure who never speaks but works at cross purposes to the party. I kept having flashes of the end of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, an ending without an antagonist but with a fantastic event that will change the course of history.

Finally, I made a list of stories built on the *Alice in Wonderland* structure and started to extract plot elements from those stories that seemed like good motivators for my game.

Story Development

Once I had a strong set of images, plot points, setting ideas and characters, I began to build a rough outline of my adventure. I built a rough three-act plot structure with the following elements:

1. A conflict with a bully in the real world, to establish the value of the compass item and act as a light tutorial to get players into the game.
2. A chase sequence after the stolen compass and the silver man that crosses from the real world into the fantasy world, which the party inevitably

bly fails and finds themselves stranded in the fantasy world. This is the end of act 1.

3. The introduction of a helper character to set the party moving on their investigation.
4. A pair of parallel options for investigation, the choice coloring future plot points.
5. The discovery of where the compass has been taken. Upon arrival there a trap is sprung and the party is thrown into a prison cell. This is the end of act 2.
6. The escape from the prison cell (my puzzle).
7. Free exploration/combat in the endgame space, giving players a chance to show off a bit. This included optional confrontation with the sub-antagonist who set the trap.
8. Finding the compass and the silver man, witnessing a celestial event, being thrown back into the real world. This is the end of act 3.

While filling in details on this outline over the course of a few days, I had the opportunity to verbally share my story with Emmanuel Eytan. He pointed out two major weaknesses in my story – first, like *Alice in Wonderland*, my world didn't feel coherent and was therefore likely to make players feel a lack of agency. It was important that my world have a more concrete feel to it, so that players could make plans within the logic of the world and expect them to work. The second weakness was that the compass wasn't a strong enough motivator. Emmanuel suggested that I have a friend of the characters be kidnapped instead, and when the trap is sprung the bad guys can steal the compass, revealing that the kidnapped friend was just bait. I immediately took both of these suggestions to heart and did a quick redesign of my outline.

Research

When I was happy with my outline I knew I was ready to create the final documentation I would take into the game with me, but I wasn't sure yet what it would look like. So I grabbed a couple of pre-made modules (one from 4th ed D&D, and one from Star Wars: Saga Edition) and outlined them, getting a feel for the structure of the document and how much detail they put into each part of the plot.

I discovered that although these modules could be read as a roughly linear narrative, they were actually orga-

nized by physical location (in the order the characters were most likely to visit them). Under each location you would find characters, events, and other special encounters as sub-headings.

Locations would always include lots of information that the players might never see. Where the location is relative to its world, the general purpose of the location, bits of its history, important political figures in the area, and any other bits of information that natives would know. Then there would be a description of what kind of people inhabit the area, their default kind of dress and attitude toward the players, the kind of work they do, the sort of businesses one might find nearby. Finally, there's often a reference to a detailed map of the area.

A **character** sub-heading will not just describe where the character first appears, but also a physical and emotional description, any relevant backstory, motivations, disposition, other relationships, and sometimes hobbies. It then goes on to describe *objectives* for conversation. There is usually a primary objective that the GM is trying to spin the conversation towards, in order to give players a key piece of information. There are often a number of secondary objectives (sometimes five or six) which are other important outcomes if the players raise certain topics.

An **event** sub-heading will sometimes introduce a combat scenario and sometimes include special rules for a different kind of encounter (a chase, for example). Either way, there are usually two or more possible outcomes and descriptions each: How the GM can spin them to get the party back on track, repercussions down the road, specific benefits or losses, and possible plot hooks for future sessions.

Paperwork

I finally sat down and named my protagonists (they were originally going to be two girls and a boy, but since I had three guys playing I adjusted to make them all boys) and created a little background for each.

I built out a four-page outline of my adventure using this structure, and devoted another page to character bios. I created two maps and the character bios in parallel to writing the adventure (this helped with creativity) with the intent of copying the maps in large scale as the players explored the world. The maps helped create the

concrete feeling I was missing before, and it was easier to give the world a consistent feeling as I wrote the more detailed document. Finally I created character sheets on 4"x6" cards – this was a mistake, I should have just printed them up, it took too long. I was haphazard assigning skill points, just trying to make the characters different enough to be interesting.

Materials

Here's what I took to the session:

- Four pages of adventure summary
- One page of short character bios
- Two detailed maps: One for the city district, and one for the warehouse where the endgame takes place.
- Blank interest curve sheets with loose plot events already written in (room for more events).
- Three player character card/sheets, plus one equally detailed card for the kidnapped friend that the players had access to.
- Six very crude character card/sheets for my major NPCs.
- A big post-it note pad and Crayola markers for mapping. Grid was never important in my game, we played fast and loose with movement speeds.
- Chess pieces to position PCs and NPCs on the map.
- Two d20s. None of my players brought dice, so I had to run and borrow two more from Anthony H.
- Eight extra markers (checkers) which got used in several ways during the adventure.
- Pencils for all players.
- Voice recorder
- iPod touch for photos
- A wide book as a DM screen
- Post-it notes (because you never know)

Time

It's hard to estimate how long this took to create because so much of the process was merely thinking about it while doing other activities. I'm fairly certain that it took at least twelve dedicated hours to create this adventure.

Brainstorming

Puzzle

1. **Language puzzles** – Some people like language puzzles (like the D’ni numerals) but others do not. I’m a fan of these. I would enjoy integrating a simple glyph/language puzzle into my game.
2. **Metapuzzle structure** – *Riven* is the ultimate example of this. You begin the game near a puzzle that is not solvable until the very end of the game, after you’ve collected clues from other puzzles.
3. **Subtle puzzles** – For much of *Riven* you encounter objects that aren’t even obviously a puzzle, and you constantly encounter clues for puzzles you haven’t found yet. This seems to violate the “lock before key” principle but it’s all so mysterious that it works. You start the game by just wandering around, and the objective evolves organically. However, these subtle puzzles depend on the player having a near-unlimited amount of time to wander around and re-examine the environment, which will break narrative pacing and push us over our three-hour limit. Therefore I should avoid being so subtle.
4. **The “crawl under the door” puzzle** – One of the most devious puzzles at the beginning of *Riven* is a locked door made of driftwood lashed together. No matter what you do, you can’t unlock the door; the trick is to realize that you can click beneath the door to crawl under it. It really opens up the player’s mind to the kind of actions they can take in this game. Maybe I could use something like this as an introduction to my kind of puzzles?
5. **Power puzzles** – The most common gating puzzle in the Myst games is a puzzle to provide power to an area. This nicely sets the player up to explore an environment, and then re-explore it after the power has turned on to see what new options have opened up. This might be very boring in a tabletop adventure, but hey, I’m supposed to be experimenting here, right?
6. **Knowledge puzzles** – It would be fun to simulate character knowledge via Wikipedia. Say a character has a Knowledge (Topic) skill of X. Maybe they know everything in the Wikipedia article on Topic, and may follow X/3 links from that page – or maybe they may hit X pages in category Topic during the game.

Setting

1. **Contemporary supernatural** – Modern day give or take twenty years. Too clichéd? I haven’t played *DX:HR* but I don’t want to accidentally copy it. I’d prefer to go with something a little more like *Fringe* where the players have access to ordinary technology but encounter extraordinary/supernatural things.
2. **Contemporary fantastic** – Maybe I want to go with something more like *Alice in Wonderland* or *Pan’s Labyrinth*, where players are encountering things they never expected.
3. **Memory Touches** – See *The Dark Crystal*?
4. **The Remnants** – My favorite setting out of *Epic Mickey* was easily Mickeyjunk Mountain. There’s something wonderful and fantastic about the clutter of a person’s life or imagination or past. Bits of *Psychonauts* bring out this feeling as well.

Character

1. **The silver-skinned man** – I don’t want to create the blue atomic guy from *Watchmen*, but I can see a nonthreatening figure with liquid silver creating a sense of the unexpected that I would like my players to experience. A little more *Alice in Wonderland* than *Watchmen*.
2. **Child PCs** – Right now I’m thinking of the player characters as children. I want to make it immediately obvious to them that they are not dangerous or combat-ready characters, and children seem more equipped to encounter a cast of weird, wild characters and take it in stride. I’m looking for a sort of simple child’s logic in the world.

3. **The mentor** – I'd like the players to get their main quest from a figure they meet near the boundary between the mundane and the fantastic. The image in my head is of a cartoonishly large man running a small business – someone like the DOTA2 shopkeeper featured in their trailer, or the boss from *Moulin Rouge*, or Totoro; the kind of size exaggeration you usually only see in Eastern cartoons. A tiny bowler hat (like the guy from Popeye) would be funny, but he needs to be an expansive and colorful personality as if his size is a reflection of his charisma score.
4. **The ape** – I imagine an oversized chimpanzee (King Louie from Disney's *The Jungle Book*) running a grimy sweatshop full of monkeys and other animals (like the wicked witch from *The Wiz*). I see him as a kind of Fagin character, but much less sympathetic. This would make a good apparent villain, but his (her?) defeat needs to not be the end of the story.
5. **A Harlequin?** – Something like this often shows up in related works.
6. **The Urchin** – An alternative hook-introduction character if the PCs avoid shops. Could be a traitor at endgame.
7. **Heavy Hands** – Could be a random encounter, or an ailment applied to a PC for part of the game.

Plot

1. **In search of a stolen object** – An easy plot hook for child PCs would be for one of them to have something precious stolen, and for the group to go in pursuit of it. They follow the thief “down the rabbit hole” as it were. This is the set-up for *Labyrinth*, although in that movie the motivation is a little more complex.
2. **Discovery/Bestowal of the gifts** – After getting sucked into this fantasy world, the characters must receive/discover something that makes them special or heroic. This is like the gifts from Aslan, the ruby slippers, the Orin, or the power of friendship. Maybe the mentor bestows the gifts.
3. **Retrieval of the object** – By the halfway point, the group needs to have recovered the missing object, but they also need to have picked up a new, more important objective. This is important – instead of simply being trapped or conscripted to pursue this object, it should be their decision to continue with the secondary objective, making them take ownership of it. Huge bonus points if I can make this decision into a kind of coming-of-age experience for one of the characters. This could conflate with the bestowal of gifts; perhaps the lost item is really a powerful artifact, and now the players must use it to help the inhabitants of the world.
4. **Return to life** – At the end of the story the characters should return to their mundane life. They are barred from re-entry into the fantasy (either explicitly with a locked door, or implicitly with a change of location) and hopefully are changed for the experience. There should be some question about whether it was all a dream – until some physical evidence of the fantasy world shows up (a found object, a scar, a character or characters) and cements the experience in the characters' minds.
5. **Story References** – This story is definitely in the vein of *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Labyrinth*, *Little Nemo*, *The Neverending Story*, *Pan's Labyrinth*, *Peter Pan*, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *The Pagemaster*.

Adventure for Story Citadel

PCs: Liddy (Alice Liddell) Gail (Dorothy Gale) Peter (Pan)

Siblings? Friends? What keeps them together?

Sports team? Roller derby team? Common destination?

Could make two fantasy characters.

I Down the Rabbit Hole - Kids at commonplace event. Sentimental object stolen by fantasy character. Follow character to rabbit hole.

II Lost in the City - In pursuit, the party finds themselves lost in a bustling city and are driven into a shop where they meet the mentor or to the rooftops/sewers where they meet the orphan. NPC provides backstory on stolen object and aid.

III Catch the APE - PCs go in search of lost item, find Ape's lair, retrieve object. Learns of real threat (unkleasus it?)

IV Facing the Big BAD - Party goes out to face real threat.

V Self-Discovery - A return to life. Encounter with silver man.

A guide - Incidental character encounter, seeking information.

Rabbit Hole - Down a tubslide? Down a tunnel? At playground.

Object stolen by silver bird? Flamingo? Dodo?

F14853 - love it!
F44079 - " "

Pepper Knave

A fantasy adventure by Brad Buchanan

George A. Morris Memorial Playground

The Morris Playground sits in the heart of the small coastal town called Gold Beach, Oregon. It was erected in 1963 across from the town's tiny library. The playground itself is little more than a field of patchy costal grass surrounded by bushes, briars, and the occasional colorful splash of Indian Paintbrush. The playground equip-



ment is mostly painted iron and wood, worn and rusted by the salt air. There is a six-foot slide, a tall swing set with three swings, a jungle-gym, a couple of rocking-horse airplanes and a pair of seesaws. There are also three or four cement pipes that form tunnels around the playground.

The date is February 2004. It is breezy and misty, cold enough for a light jacket. A handful of bored moms chaperone two dozen kids who are running around, playing with balls and kites, and competing for the limited equipment.

Tommy Ryerson

From the ground, Alex, you see the sky in its permanent overcast through a few droplets of rain spattered on your glasses. You see Alan yelling at the other kids crowded around you. You see James trying to

help you up, and you see Graham – your kid neighbor who might be like your little brother if he wasn't so tall – you see Graham quietly sidling up to Tommy Ryerson, hoping to get the last laugh.

Tommy Ryerson is the school bully. Typically the teachers keep him in check, but right now you're not in school. Right now he's standing over you, dangling your father's compass just out of reach. He laughs, and his stupid slobbery bully laugh gets spit on your shirt. The other kids laugh with him. They're all so stupid.

Tommy is a simple bully. Nearly two years older than Alex but still in his grade, he's bored and underappreciated. All he wants is attention, and he gets it by humiliating the smallest person he can find – in this case, Alex. He's taken Alex's compass, probably making fun of him for "wearing a necklace."

Challenge: The players should try to get the compass back. They can try to talk him down, fight with him, or any other plan they come up with.

An Investigation check of 15 will allow a player to recall an embarrassing detail about Tommy. A Subterfuge check of 15 will allow a player to invent such a detail. A style check of 15 will allow a player to make general insults and turn the crowd to their side.

If the party does not recover the compass quickly, Tommy gets tired and kicks Alex for 1 hp, then drops the compass and leaves.

The Silver Swallow

Suddenly you notice Graham is gone. Looking around, you spot him near one of the cement tubes, trying to catch a small bird. Even on a cloudy day the bird shines like its feathers are mirrors.

Graham disappears into the tube.

If the party investigates the tube to find Graham and the strange bird, they arrive in time to see

them both disappear through a haze of static, like a poorly-tuned television. Graham never shows any fear, only curiosity. Ideally, the party follows them through. If they hesitate, a strong wind pulls them down and into the portal.

Pepper Knave: The Ragged District

Pepper Knave is a huge, run-down urban sprawl of a city filled with fantastic inhabitants of every shape and size. It has the gritty, dirty feel of 19th century London, although the technology level is closer to the early 20th century.

The Ragged District is a low-income industrial part of town containing a mishmash of factories and hole-in-the-wall curiosity shops. The streets are narrow and packed with people and animals and a few unidentifiable creatures, all wearing drab colors. They hurry from place to place with eyes down, and generally try and wave off attempts to interact.

You find yourselves hurling through space, losing your sense of time and direction, until suddenly you are standing ankle-deep in a shallow fountain on one edge of a small square. Dilapidated buildings, three and four stories high, surround the square on all sides. Narrow alleys exit the square in five directions. The cloudy sky has a faint greenish tinge.

People of every shape and size rush back and forth before you, but if anybody noticed your sudden appearance they haven't shown it.

Abruptly your eye is drawn to a bright spot in the crowd. Graham is there, to your left, struggling with a tall shining figure.

The shining figure is the Silver Gentleman. His shape suggests a top hat and tails, but his figure reflects everything around him as though he and his clothes were made of mirrored, liquid silver. He has no face, and never speaks. The silver swallow is his familiar, and sits on his shoulder when not doing his bidding. The Gentleman's

true objective is to acquire Alex's compass – kidnapping Graham is just a lure. Shortly after the players enter the District, the Gentleman will notice them and take off down the left-hand alley with Graham in tow.

If the players examine the Gentleman more closely, they see that he has a hand around Graham's wrist and seems fully impervious to Graham's attempts to break free.

If players follow the Gentleman successfully, they will see him pull Graham through a solid brick wall at a dead end, leaving their trail cold. If they ignore the Gentleman, he will quietly disappear with Graham.

Porthos

At this point in the story Porthos the shopkeeper will show up. If the party followed the Silver Gentleman to a dead end, Porthos may find them in the street. If they did not, inclement weather may drive them to a nearby business – which just happens to be Porthos' shop.

Porthos is a titan of a man, seven feet tall and nearly as broad. He is a veritable bull in his own china shop, always breaking things. Porthos is a generous person and is truly concerned for the party.

He brings the party into his shop where he engages them a discussion about their lost friend. Porthos expresses sympathy – the Silver Gentleman is often seen taking children who appear in the square, and nobody ever sees them again.

During the discussion he notices Alex's compass, and (though tempted to buy it) pulls out a book to show them that the compass is actually a rare and powerful artifact that can align the stars for its owner – if one only knew how to talk to the stars.

From this point forward, the compass becomes a good luck charm, and should give a +1 circum-

stance bonus to its bearer on any rolls involving chance.

Upon being pressured, Porthos reveals that he doesn't know where the Gentleman takes the children, but he knows who you might ask: A rooftop urchin named Parker who's tricky but might be able to lead them, or the rag hag who is crazy, but knows where everybody goes.

Parker

Parker is a clever rooftop urchin girl who actually does know plenty about the Gentleman's operation. She wears tattered but colorful clothes: An iridescent diamond-patterned top stolen from a travelling troupe, and trousers patched in five places.

Parker is wary of the group at first. Mention of Porthos' name will lower her guard a little bit. A bribe will do a lot more. Some smooth talking will do the job as well, but it may take time.

If players attempt to engage the character romantically she will show restrained interest in Alan, but will ignore Alex and James.

If the party is successful in acquiring Parker's assistance she will lead them directly to the factory. However upon arrival unless the party has sufficiently swayed her or bribed her, she will reveal their presence to the Silver Gentleman.

Rag Hag

The other option for the party is to seek the crazy lady who has such keen eyes and sees everything that happens in her district. She will be suspicious of them, and will not accept bribes. After some persuading (or intimidating) she will talk about where the children are taken, revealing enough information for the party to piece together which factory they have to go to.

Crumb's Garment Warehouse

One way or another, the party will learn that their friend was taken to Crumb's Garment

Warehouse, a large block building on the corner of Anchory and Ferm with filthy yellowed windows.

The warehouse is run by Old Crumb, a huge chimpanzee with a bad temper. The operation is really a sweatshop where kidnapped children are forced to sew cheap clothing for no pay.

See the map of Crumb's Garment Warehouse.

The Trap!

Graham is being held in a cell on the basement level. There are a few other kids in the cells, all new arrivals and frightened. The party will find it relatively simple to reach Graham undetected, but it's a trap! Crumb and a number of subordinate chimps appear and capture the party with a net. Crumb steals Alex's compass and leaves the party locked together in the cell.

Escaping the Cell

The group is jailed in a cell. There should be strong hints in the cell that someone has escaped before. A light red herring (of keys on the far wall) is in place but actually they need to move a box beneath a bunk to find a tunnel previously dug that leads to a different part of the warehouse.

Navigating the Warehouse

The group now has their run of the warehouse to try and find the Silver Gentleman and recover Alex's compass.

Confronting Old Crumb

The party can find Old Crumb and try to teach him a lesson, or they can leave him alone.

Rescuing the Kids

The party can attempt to lead the other kids in the sweatshop out of the warehouse, or cut them loose to wreak havoc.

The Silver Gentleman's Tower

The Silver Gentleman has a laboratory in a tower above the warehouse. The party has to make

their way to the tower. Once inside they will find otherworldly astronomical and astrological experiments. They encounter no resistance inside the tower.

Facing the Silver Gentleman

The party arrives in time to find the Silver Gentleman on the roof, using the compass to realign the stars. He is singing to them with a mysterious music. His goal is to align the stars to bring himself good fortune. Set-up for future campaign – the Silver Gentleman has fate on his side from now on.

The party must devise a way to retrieve the compass from the Silver Gentleman. They may be utterly unsuccessful, they may push him off the roof. It's possible that once the stars are aligned he simply vanishes into the sky, leaving the compass for Alex to retrieve.

The Collapse

Once the stars are aligned, an earthquake begins, and slowly gravity reverses, causing the party to float up into the night sky. They hurtle toward the stars at an incredible speed, and at last find themselves waking up in the rain at Morris Playground.

Back at the Playground

If there is enough time, the party may be able to manage one last encounter with Tommy Ryerson. Having gained confidence from their wild adventure they teach him a lesson.

Character Bios

Alex Little

A player character. Age 11. An intensely curious, undersized, intellectual young man. Always reading books or chasing rabbits around the backyard. Named for Alice Liddel of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Physical 9, Mental 13, Social 10. Investigation 4, Science 3, Medicine 1, Computers 1, Repair 1, Performance 2, Subterfuge 1.

Inventory: Brass compass.

Alan Wood

A player character. Age 12. A charismatic kid that's usually well-liked. Not winning any fights or acing any tests, but the others look up to him. Plays baseball. Named for Alan Alexander Milne, author of *Winnie the Pooh*.

Physical 10, Mental 10, Social 12. Long-range combat 1, Combat defense 1, Athletics 1, Science 2, Computers 1, Leadership 4, Performance 1, Subterfuge 2, Style 3.

James Young

A player character. Age 11. Physically strong, feels like he can hold his own against anyone (though it's not always true). He's got moxie, this one. Plays baseball among other sports. Named for James Matthew Barrie, author of *Peter Pan*.

Physical 14, Mental 9, Social 9. Unarmed combat 3, Melee combat 2, Long-range combat 1, Combat defense 2, Athletics 2, Medicine 2, Leadership 1, Intimidation 3, Style 1.

Graham Sierra

An ally of the players. Age 10. The youngest member of the group, but maybe the most adventurous (and likely to get into trouble). A scrapper – good at getting out of tricky situations. Named for King Graham of *King's Quest*, published by Sierra.

Physical 9, Mental 10, Social 10. Unarmed combat 1, Melee combat 2, Long-range combat 2, Combat defense 2, Athletics 2, Stealth 2, Performance 1, Intimidation 1, Subterfuge 2.

Tommy Ryerson

The neighborhood bully. Age 13. Older than the other kids, not too smart but knows how to get his way.

Physical 14, Mental 10, Social 10. Unarmed combat 4, Combat defense 3, Athletics 1, Intimidation 3.

Silver Gentleman

The mysterious antagonist of the story, the Silver Gentleman is a noble in pursuit of powerful artifacts.

Physical 11, Mental 12, Social 14. Combat Defense (Metallic) 10, Investigation 2, Science 5, Medicine 2, Artifact Lore 8, Leadership 4, Intimidation 2, Subterfuge 2, Style 1.

Porthos

A shopkeeper in the Ragged District who knows more than he should. Mentor figure to the party.

Physical 12, Mental 12, Social 11.

Parker

A cunning rooftop urchin.

Physical 11, Mental 8, Social 13.

Rag Hag

An old lady that sees everything.

Physical 8, Mental 8, Social 7.

Old Crumb

A huge, old chimpanzee wearing a wool coat and a cabbie cap. A cold and ruthless personality. Runs a sweatshop in the Ragged District.

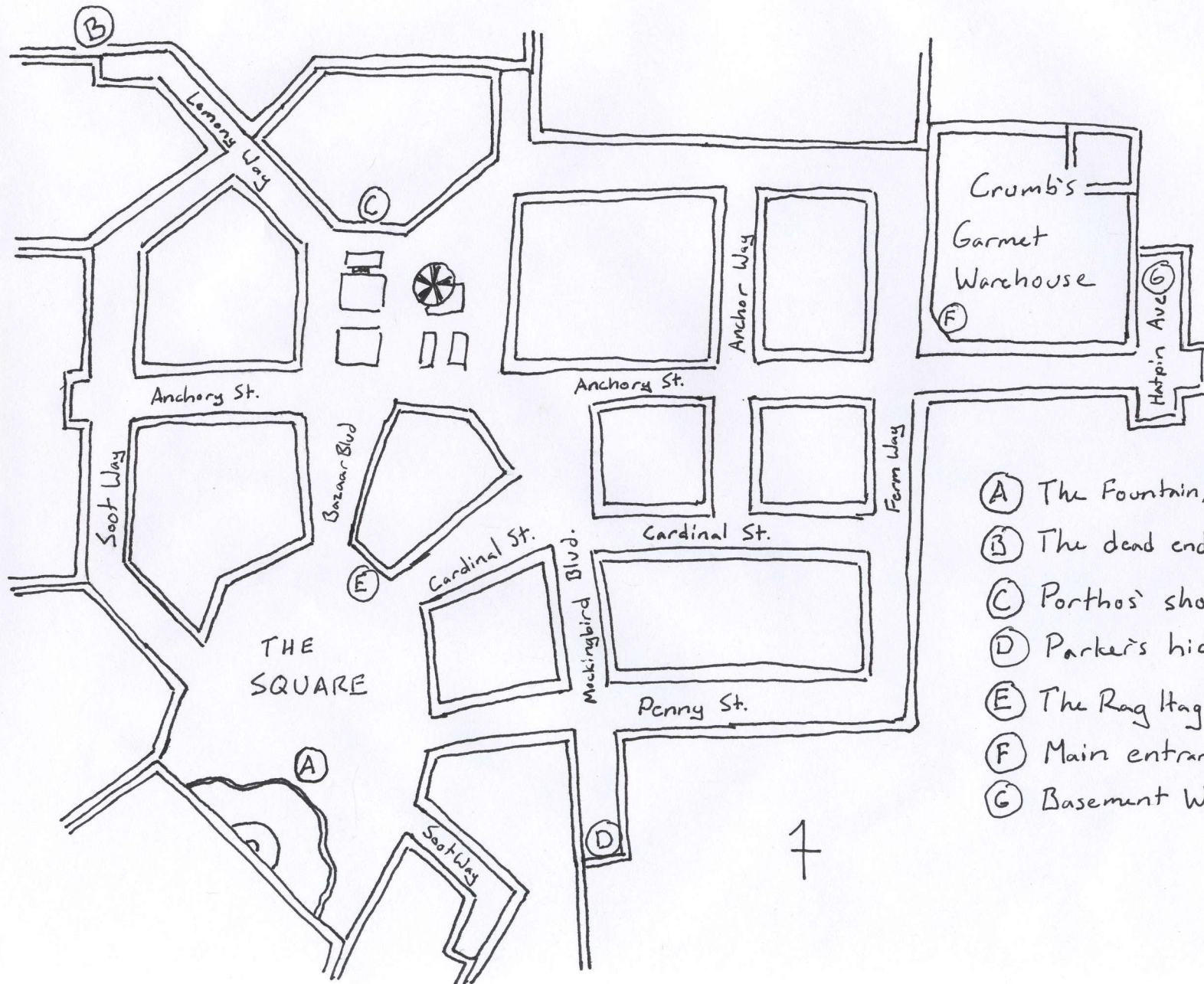
Physical 14, Mental 12, Social 9.

Credits

- Thanks to Emmanuel Eytan for being my story sounding board and fixing my broken plot.
- Thanks to my wife Alleson for help brainstorming about childhood-fantastic adventures.
- Thanks to Dave Faulkner, Kai Zhang and Jimmy Koppel for playing it first.
- Photo on page 1: "berlin tentstation - old playground" by fariwesen. Used under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 license, also under fair use (for educational purposes).
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/fariwesen/5650101819/>.

PEPPER KNAVE

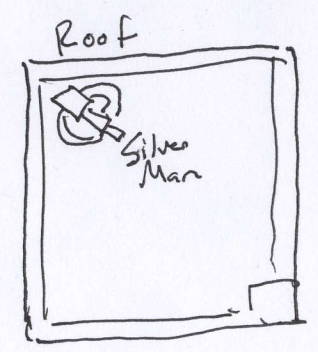
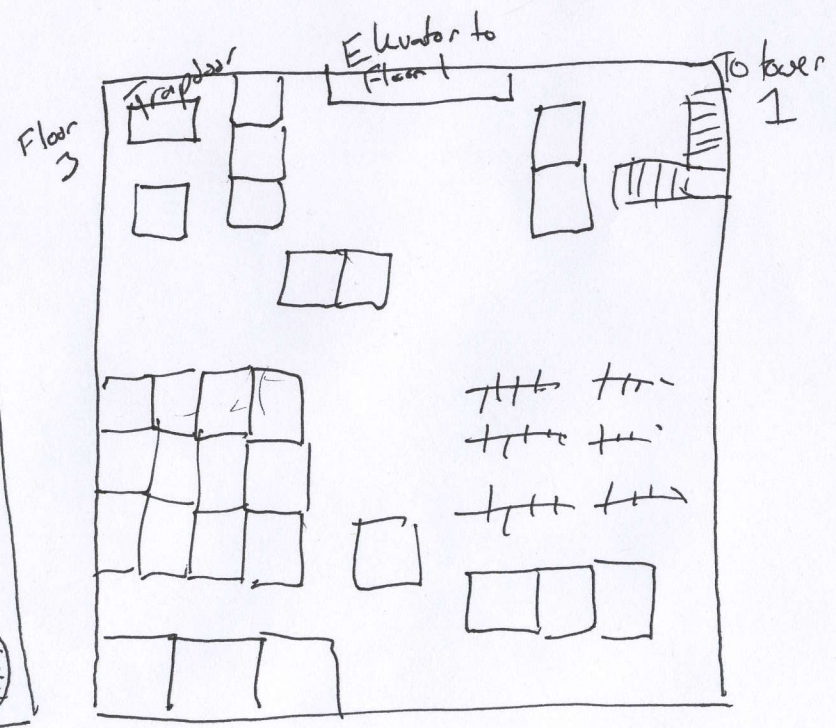
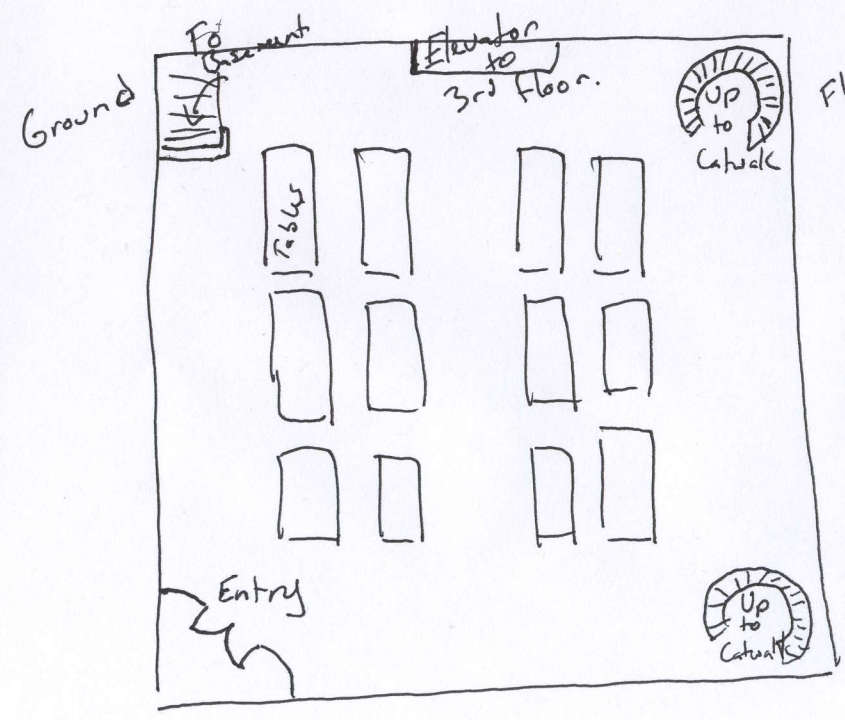
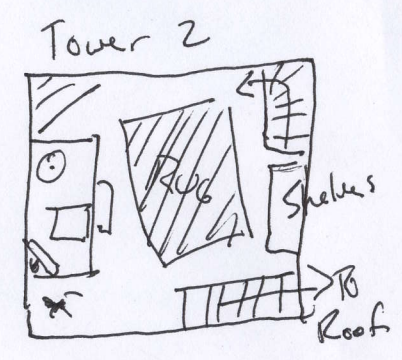
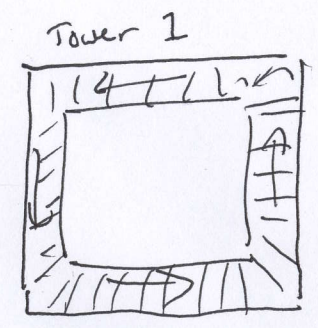
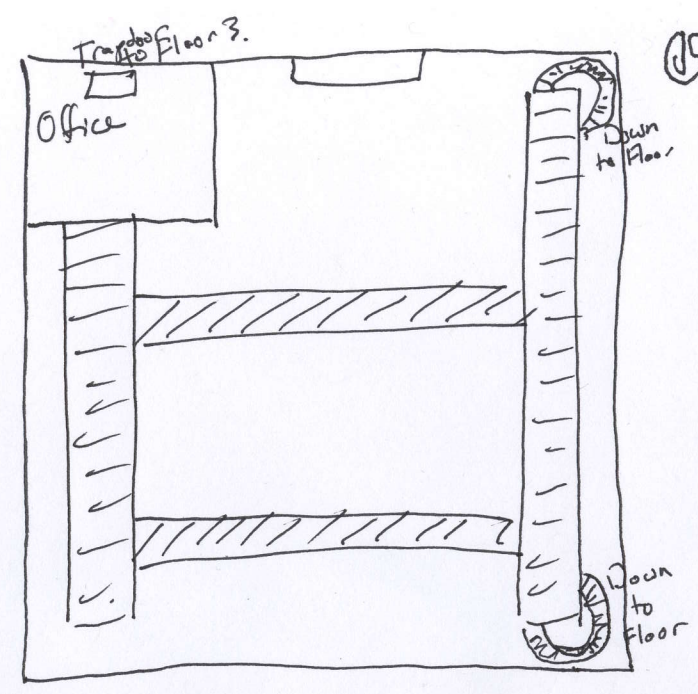
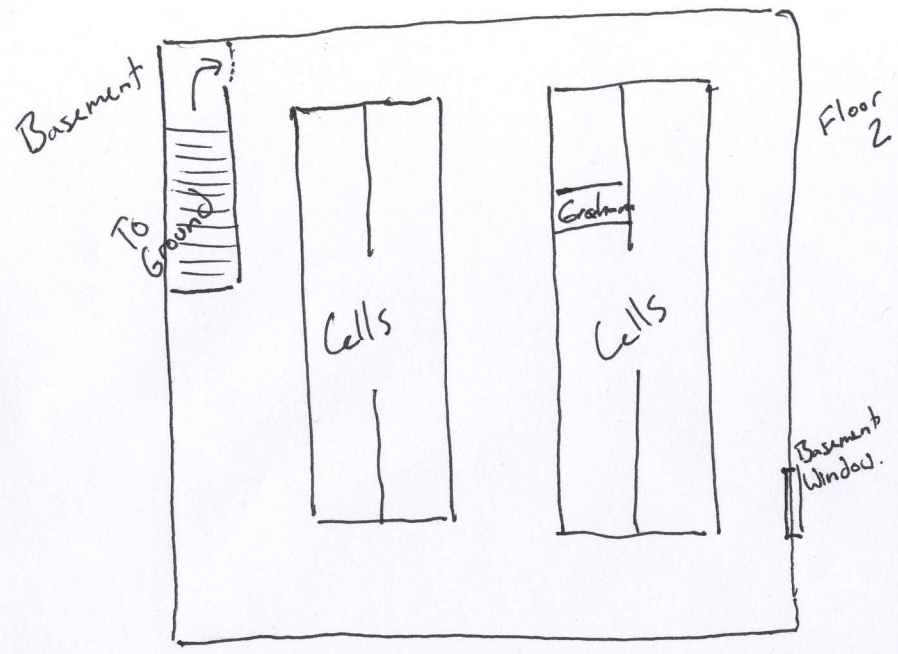
THE RAGGED DISTRICT



- (A) The Fountain, where the party starts.
- (B) The dead end where the gentleman vanishes.
- (C) Porthos' shop (usually)
- (D) Parker's hideout
- (E) The Rag Itag
- (F) Main entrance to warehouse
- (G) Basement Window

CRUMB'S

ARMET WAREHOUSE



1

ALEX LITTLE

Player Jimmy

PHY 9

HP 9

MEN 13

SOC 10

Age 11. Curious, intellectual.

Short. Estranged father.

Unarmed 0 -1

Melee 0 -1

Ranged 0 -1

Defense 0 -1

Athletics 0 -1

Stealth 0 -1

Investigation 4+7

Science 3+6

Medicine 1+4

Repair 1+4

Computers 1+4

Leadership 0 +0

Performance 2 +2

Intimidation 0 +0

Subterfuge 1 +1

Style 0 +0

Inventory: Brass Compass, glasses, pen, planks, Molotov

ALLAN Wood

PHY 10

HP 10

MEN 10

SOC 12

Player Dave!

Age 12. Charismatic, liked.

Plays baseball (pitcher).

Unarmed 0 +0

Melee 0 +0

Ranged 1 +1

Defense 1 +1

Athletics 1 +1

Stealth 0 +0

Investigation 0 +0

Science 2 +2

Medicine 0 +0

Repair 0 +0

Computers 1 +1

Leadership 4 +6

Performance 1 +3

Intimidation 0 +2

Subterfuge 2 +4

Style 3 +5

Inventory: Kleenex, keys.

Ball 1/2 box Band-aids

JAMES YOUNG

PHY 14

MEN 9

SOC 9

HP 14

Player Kai

Age 11. Athlete, confident,
has moxie. Star baseball player.

Unarmed 3 +7

Melee 2 +6

Ranged 1 +5

Defense 2 +6

Athletics 2 +6

Stealth 0 +4

Investigation 0 -1

Science 0 -1

Medicine 2 +1

Repair 0 -1

Computers 0 -1

Leadership 1 +0

Performance 0 -1

Intimidation 3 +2

Subterfuge 0 -1

Style 1 +0

Inventory: Baseball glove. Ballcap. Two quarters.
Slingshot

GRAHAM

SIERRA

Non-Player

PHY 9 HP 9

MEN 10

SOC 10

Age 10. Most adventurous.

A scrapper, street-smart.

Unarmed	1	+0	Investigation	0	+0	Leadership	0	+0
Melee	2	+1	Science	0	+0	Performance	1	+1
Ranged	2	+1	Medicine	0	+0	Intimidation	1	+1
Defense	2	+1	Repair	0	+0	Subterfuge	2	+2
Athletics	2	+1	Computers	0	+0	Style	0	+0
Stamina	2	+1						

Inventory: Two favorite rocks.

Tommy Ryerson

PHY 14 HP 13

MEN 10

SOC 10

THE Silver Gentleman

PHY 11 HP

MEN 12

SOC 14

PORTHOS

PHY 12 HP ☐

MEN 12

SOC 11

RAG HAG

PHY 8

HP



MEN 8

SOC 7

PARKER

PHY 11 HP ☐

MEN 8

SOC 13

Old Crumb

PHY 14

HP

1

MEN 12

SOC 9

Pepper Knave: Puzzle Analysis

The puzzle I built into my adventure opens act three. Here's how I described it in my original document:

Escaping the Cell

The group is jailed in a cell. There should be strong hints in the cell that someone has escaped before. A light red herring (of keys on the far wall) is in place but actually they need to move a box beneath a bunk to find a tunnel previously dug that leads to a different part of the warehouse.

The idea here was to produce a light puzzle that would integrate well into the events of the scenario. I wanted it to be fairly straightforward – if I'm going to stick the players behind bars, I don't want them to start thinking they've hit an outright fail condition and I'm just trying to prolong the game. I also didn't want the puzzle to stick out like a sore thumb.

The Puzzle In Action

When the game was played, my puzzle very nearly fell apart because one of the characters escaped the trap that was supposed to put them all in the jail cell. Fortunately, that player was feeling grossly out-matched and put themselves in a position to hide for a while, which gave me time to run the puzzle with the other two players.

I messed up when setting up my puzzle; I described the environment as a hallway with jail cells on both sides, which killed the red herring of keys on the far wall. The players had previously noticed keys on a guard's belt, but they didn't even think about trying for those.

One of the players was carrying a wooden plank, and he proceeded to split it into fragments and attempted to make a lockpick. The first attempt failed, but the player decided he had time to just keep trying. I had to make a (probably unfair) ruling that the lockpick made of wood splinters would never work; in retrospect I should have had a guard come by and put some time pressure on the players.

Immediately after I overruled the lockpick idea, a player gave me a 25 Investigation roll so I described the cell in as much detail as I could manage. Unfortunately this included only the two bunks and a cardboard box under the bunk. Naturally the players went straight for the cardboard box and revealed the tunnel with nearly no effort.

After the game, the players asked, "Where was your puzzle?" This either means it was very well-integrated, or it wasn't challenging enough.

In Retrospect

I am very happy with how seamlessly the puzzle integrated, but I think it would have been more fun if it was more difficult. I let the skill check do too much work, and didn't populate the environment appropriately. The puzzle would have been more engaging if there were more boxes in the room, or a loose panel in the floor or ceiling, or a high window. As an additional step they could have needed something

to pry open the panel. But since my game ran just over three hours, I'm glad the puzzle didn't go any longer. It was a weak puzzle, but it served the experience well.

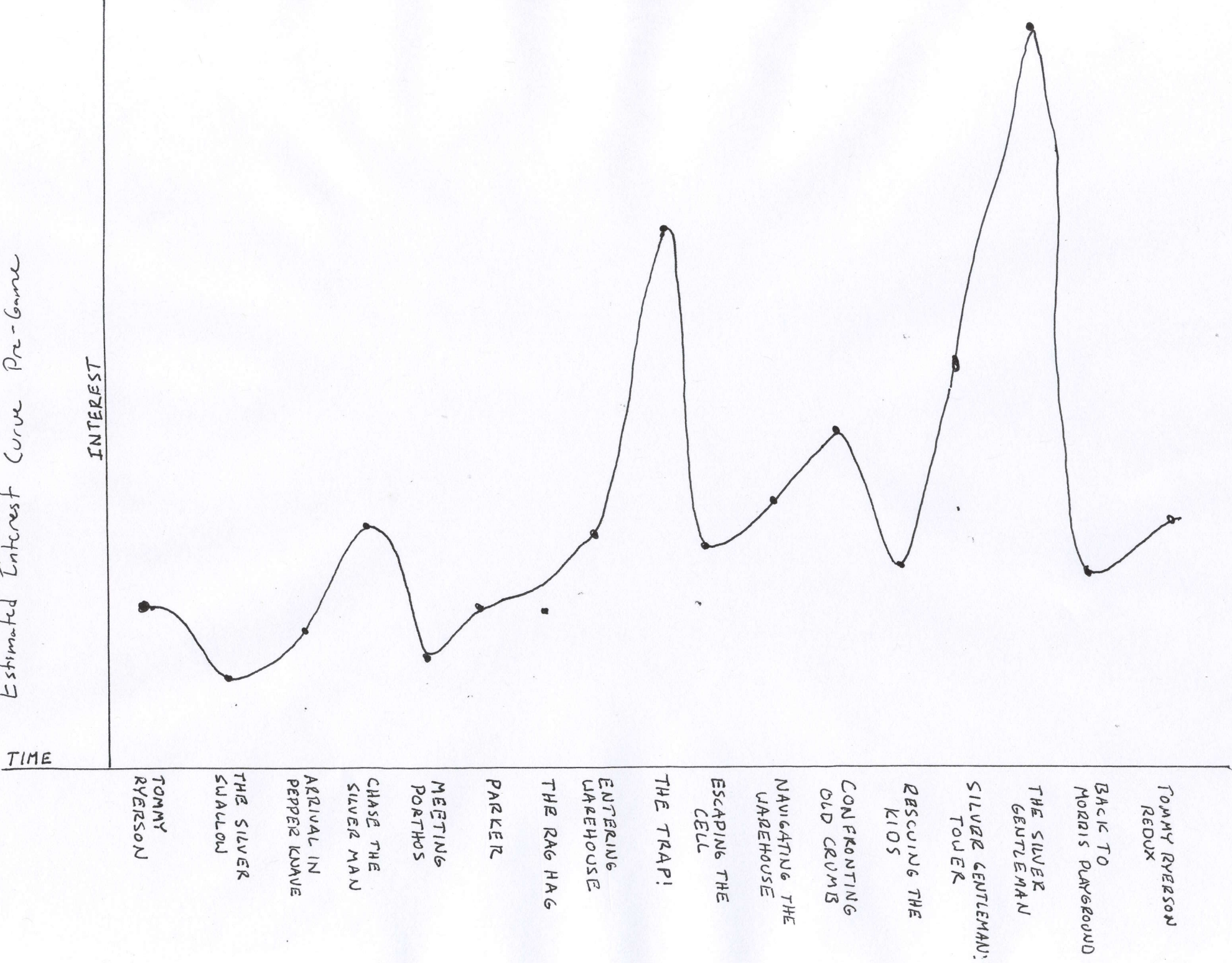
Other Puzzles

There were some other moments in my game that were puzzle-like, or at least helped to break up the pace of the game.

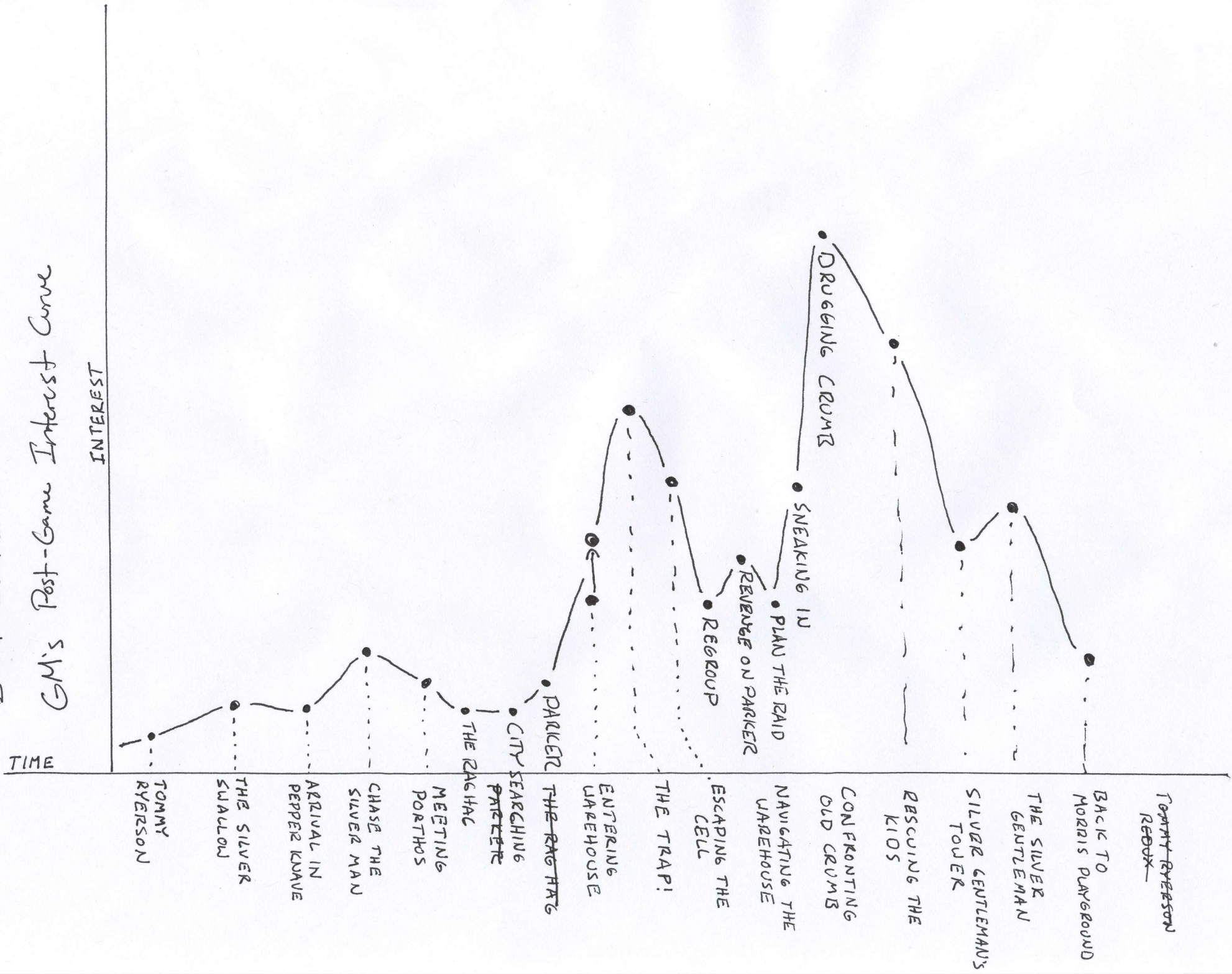
The first instance is when after the chase into Pepper Knave, the characters are given directions as an intersection of streets. Immediately the players realized that they should be looking around for street signs, and they began to explore the space in-depth and mapping as they went. While this isn't exactly a puzzle, I did intentionally plan this moment to give the players something interesting and different to do. They seemed to enjoy it – even after locating their destination they made sure to fully explore the map, learning the name of every street just in case.

The second puzzle arose dynamically. When the players went “off the rails” and went back into town to prepare their assault on the warehouse, they surprised me by putting together a very detailed plan, improvising within the environment, finding money on their own, and ending up with one character going through the front door in disguise to deliver a box of poisoned meat pies while the other two snuck in through a rear window and a rescued NPC stood guard outside. Totally unexpected, totally awesome.

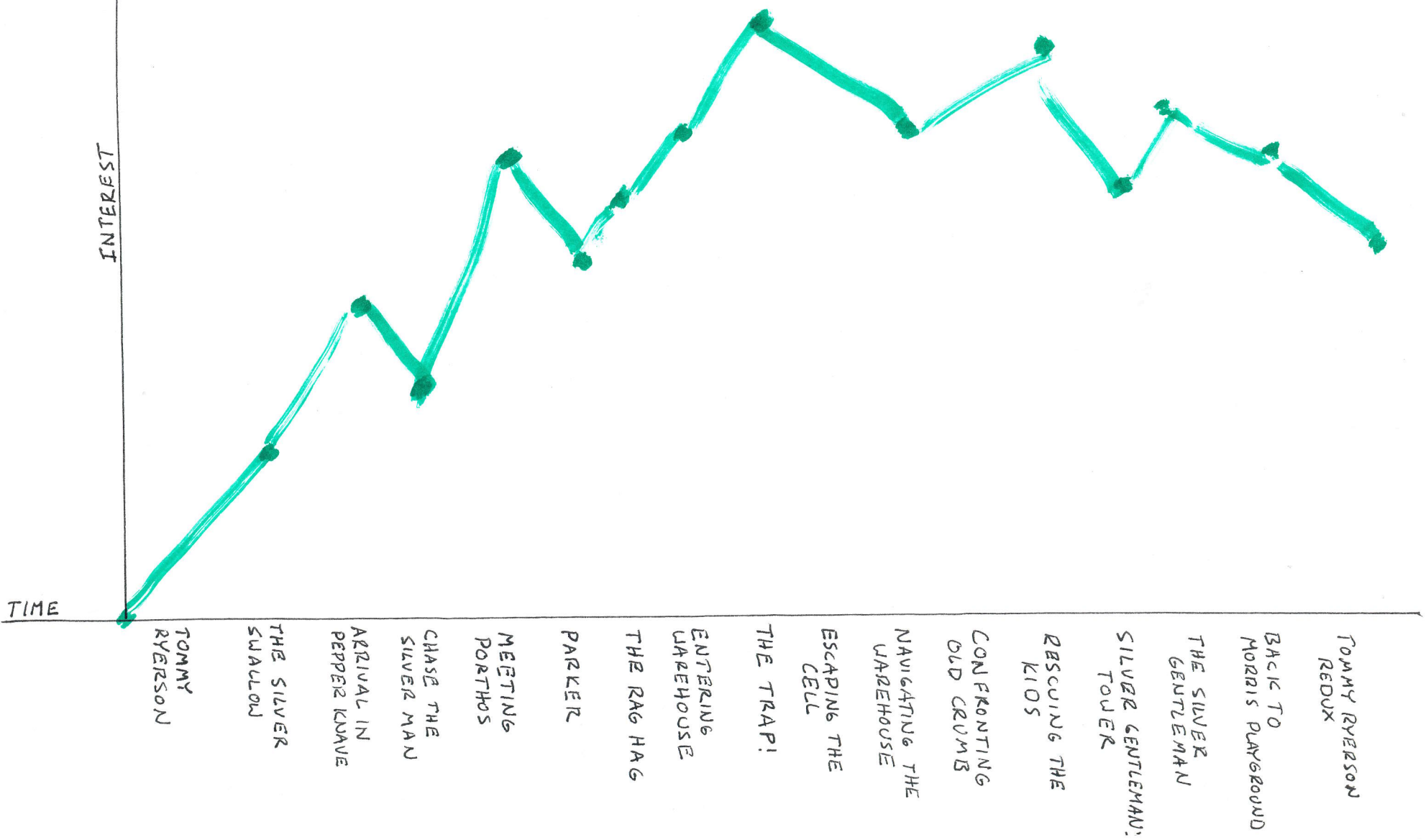
Brad Buchanan
Estimated Interest Curve Pre-Game



GM's Post-Game Interest Curve



KAI



Jimmy K
Postgame 'interest curve'

INTEREST

TIME

TOMMY
RYERSON

THE SILVER
SWALLOW

ARRIVAL IN
PEPPER KNAVE

CHASE THE
SILVER MAN

MEETING
PORTHOS

PARKER

THE RAG HAG

ENTERING
WAREHOUSE

THE TRAP!

ESCAPING THE
CELL

NAVIGATING THE
WAREHOUSE

CONFRONTING
OLD CRUMBS

RESCUING THE
KIDS

SILVER GENTLEMAN'S
TOWER

THE SILVER
GENTLEMAN

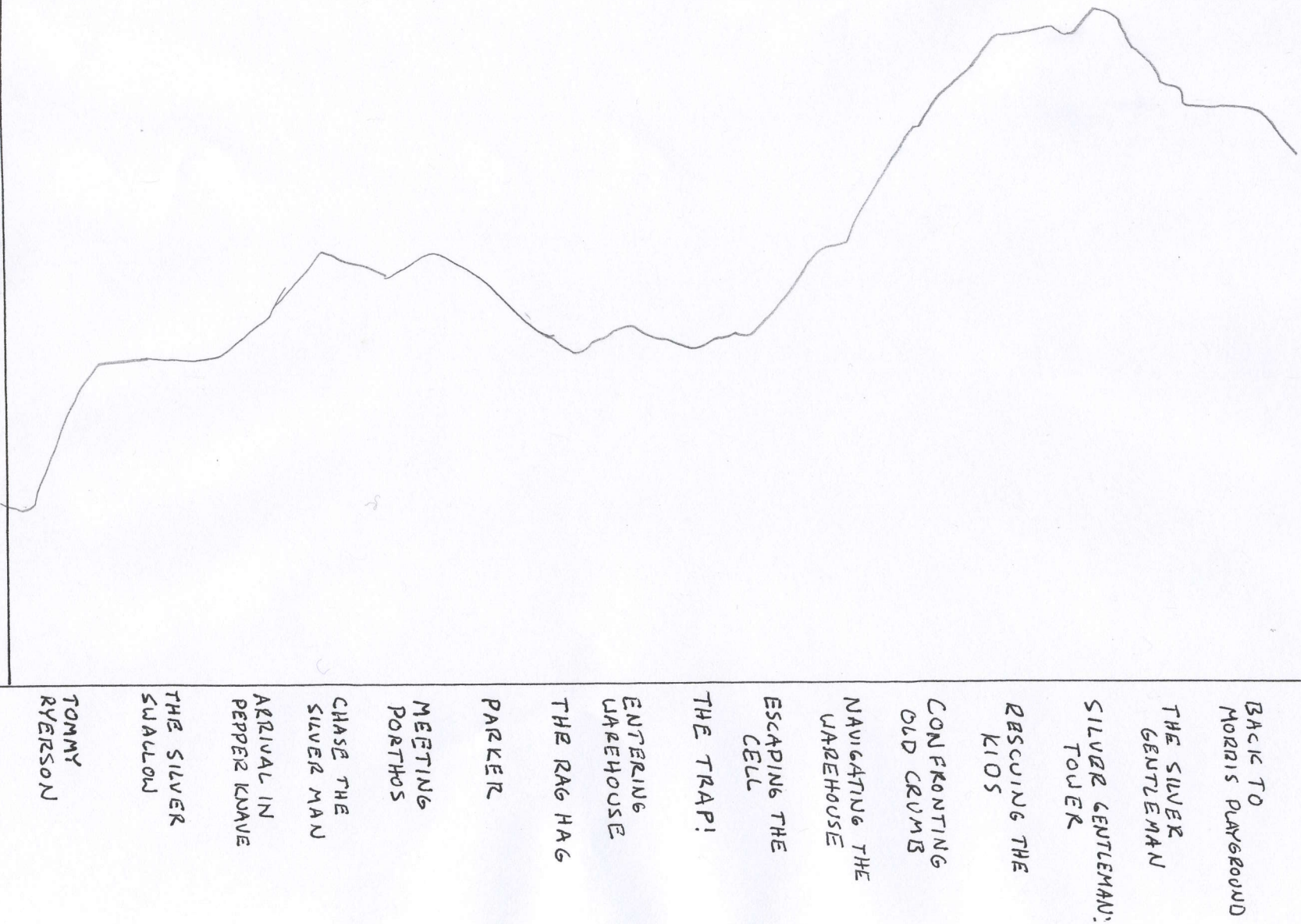
BACK TO
MORRIS PLAYGROUND

TOMMY RYERSON
REDUX

Jimmy
K

Dave Faulkner
Post-game interest curve

TIME INTEREST

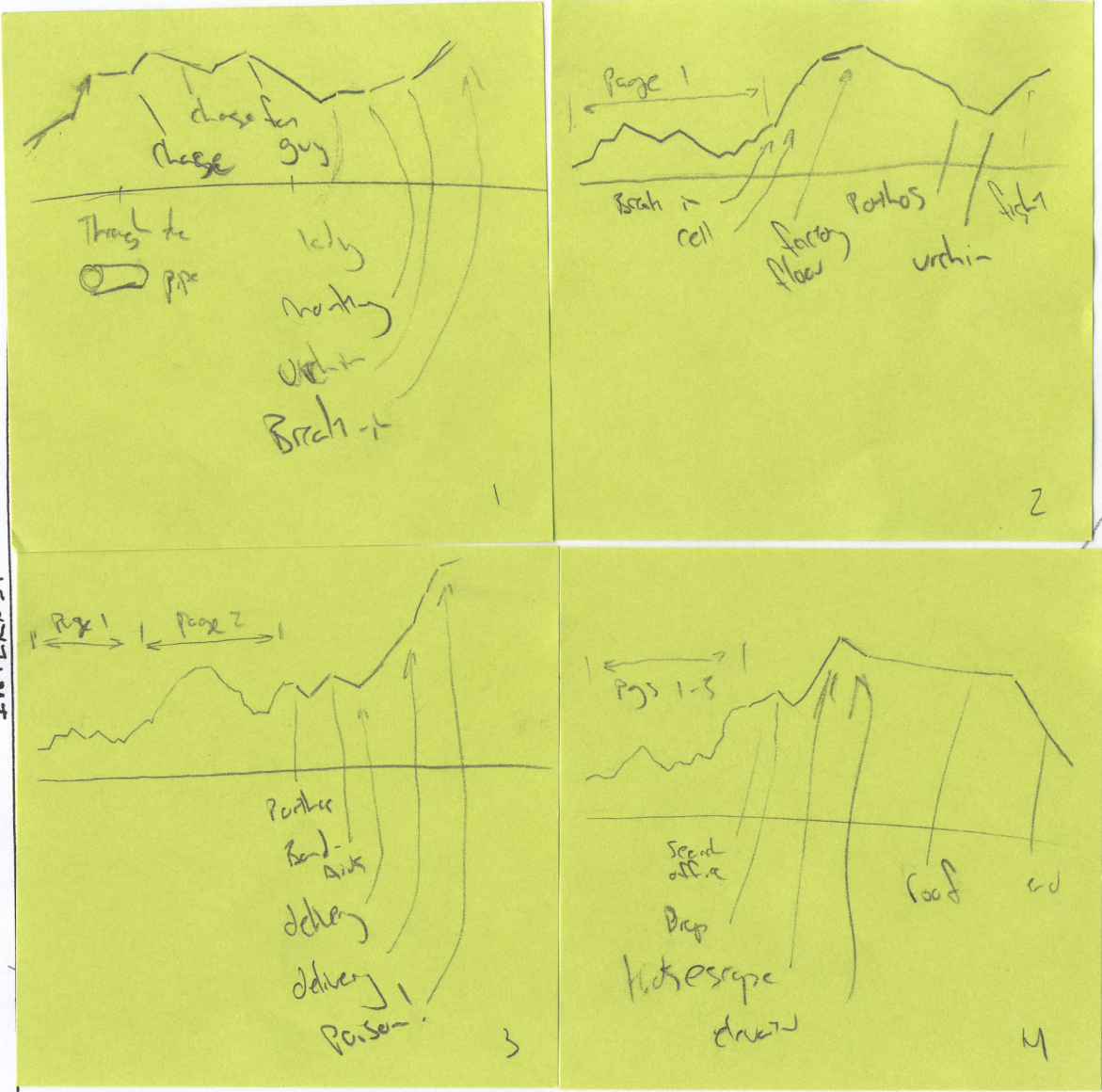


Dave Faulkner Post-game interest curve

TIME

INTEREST

TOMMY RYERSON
REDUX
BACK TO
MORRIS PLAYGROUND
THE SILVER
GENTLEMAN
SILVER GENTLEMAN:
TOWER
RESCUING THE
KIDS
CONFRONTING
OLD CRUMB
NAVIGATING THE
WAREHOUSE
ESCAPING THE
CELL
THE TRAP!
ENTERING
WAREHOUSE
THE RAG HAG
PARKER
MEETING
PORTHOS
CHASE THE
SILVER MAN
ARRIVAL IN
PEPPER KNAVE
THE SILVER
SWALLOW
TOMMY
RYERSON



Pepper Knave Postmortem

I feel absolutely *awesome* about this game as my first attempt at running a tabletop RPG, especially since I've never played D&D or any related tabletop games.

What Worked

While I account much of my success to luck and good players, here are a few things I know I did right.

- A simple story, checked by a classmate before I ran my game! The three-point structure was easy for me to keep in mind and steer the players toward while playing.
- My adventure outline document. The location-oriented organization helped me build flexibility into the adventure, and made the notes easy to reference during the game.
- Maps. Having prepared maps helped me think through unexpected player actions, and created open space in my world for improvisation during play. I think it also helped with the sense of place for the players.
- Distinctive characters. The players had no trouble keeping characters straight, in their minds or on the board.
- Timing. The major plot events were timed exactly as I planned, and the game didn't go too long. To be honest, I'm not sure how I did this, other than checking the time frequently during the game.
- Not much rolling. This was a story-oriented game, and I think that it was good to have less rolling going on.

What Didn't Work

Of course, things didn't go entirely according to plan.

- Drawing maps while playing. I found it difficult to draw and narrate at the same time, which slowed down the game at key exploration points. It didn't help that we were around a huge conference room table, so everyone had to reach for the map. A digital map/fog tool would be helpful here.
- I should have planned for some of the shops in the Ragged District, and maybe a couple of incidental encounters. Coming up with all of this on the fly was a little rough.
- Too many antagonists. I think the story would have been tighter if I'd merged the Old Crumb and Silver Man characters.
- I failed to make the stolen compass valuable enough to the players – they were ready to abandon it and just go home near the adventure's end.
- I'm not sure it was clear to the players how or why they'd been betrayed at the mid-point, but they were sure upset about it. I should have clued this earlier.

- There was too much railroading at the beginning. Next time I design an adventure, I'd like to see if I can leave the opening more open and still get the players on track.
- The jail cell escape puzzle. This should have required a little more mental work from the players. Not much – just a little.
- Combat! What we did served the game well enough, but when it came up I realized that I didn't know the simple combat system very well – how the defense numbers worked, how to track turns and all that.

Play by Play

Here is a breakdown of the actual events of our game, and how they compared to my expectations.

Tommy Ryerson

The game started slower than I expected. Opening the game by dropping new-ish players into a combat situation might have been a poor idea. The players sized up their opponent and attempted to out-think him. Even once I wrapped up this event they were launching rapid-fire questions about their environment. Now I wonder if I should have told them this would be a fantasy adventure – they were playing the opening like the whole game was going to be realistic.

The Silver Swallow

The players followed this thread just like I hoped, and two of them went right through the portal after their friend. Jimmy was extremely suspicious so I had to implement my railroading and pull him in (the players just laughed at this).

Arrival in Pepper Knave

Again, this moved a little slower than I expected. I didn't anticipate how much I'd need to describe this before we could get into the chase scene.

Chase the Silver Man

I think this is probably a hard thing to pull off in tabletop. It wasn't thrilling, in part because there was no way to stop the silver man. I also messed up the ending – the direction of the silver man's exit was the opposite of their final destination, which confused the players a bit.

Meeting Porthos

At this point I realized I was not sufficiently prepared to run this character. It worked, but was not as memorable as it could have been. I did expect this to be a low point, so no harm done.

The Rag Hag

I also felt underprepared for this conversation – in general my conversations were the low point of my preparation. A good persuasion roll ended the conversation quickly with the players knowing a street name and a destination.

City Searching

The players took time to search the city at this point, more than I expected. Then they surprised me by finding their destination, and going back to meet Parker anyway.

Parker

This character encounter went a bit better. The players were a bit hostile from the start (they were a wary bunch in general) and they never learned Parker's name.

Entering the Warehouse

This is when the game picked up and the players really engaged. I think they got the correct feeling that they were in 'enemy territory,' because the interest level in the room obviously jumped here. This is also when they *really* broke my plans for the first time, by splitting up.

The Trap

This did not go as planned, but it worked out great nonetheless – my story point got through well enough. Dave stayed hidden around the corner and didn't get caught. The other two put up a good fight – until a couple bad rolls let me turn the tide and a natural one gave the encounter a humorous finish.

Escaping the Cell

With Kai and Jimmy unconscious, Dave decided to lie low among the working kids upstairs. I took the opportunity to walk the antagonists right next to him and narrate some overheard plot, but I let him be safe there so that the other two could have their escape puzzle. The puzzle was too simple and went by faster than I expected (see full puzzle analysis). I also realized that I hadn't fully planned the escape point after the puzzle, and my improvisation (letting them appear right outside the rear window) may be responsible for the completely unplanned events that followed.

Regroup

Against my expectations, the players decided to retreat from the warehouse (my intended endgame) and instead went back into the city for a number of escapades. First they went to Porthos to confront him about the trap... and after he re-earned their trust with a couple of gifts, they spent time there recovering.

Revenge on Parker

Then the party went back to Parker's den to take their revenge (also unplanned). I ruled on the spot that Parker put up a small fight, but once she realized she was outnumbered she attempted to flee. The players made some poor rolls and Parker got away, but they searched her den and discovered quite a bit of treasure that they stole without hesitation.

Plan the Raid

The players then spent much more time in town, looking through shops (all of which I had to invent on the spot), selling stolen gems, consulting with Porthos, buying medical supplies and

disguises, meat pies and chemical cleaners, and devised a whole plan for saving the imprisoned kids that involved sending Dave in the front door disguised as a delivery boy with a box of poisoned pies while Kai and Jimmy snuck in the back again and started freeing the kids downstairs. The players expressed some sense of confusion about what to do next, but nevertheless they did exactly what I wanted by planning an invasion of the warehouse.

Sneaking In

Here the game finally gets back on track, though not in the way I expected. Dave approached the guard at the front of the warehouse and made an iffy deception roll, so to make things interesting I had the guard usher him into the warehouse to make the delivery personally (into the lion's den, so to speak). This was a good choice – the tension in the room skyrocketed at this point. The rest of Dave's rolls were good enough to get to Crumb's office.

Drugging Crumb

Dave made another good deception roll against Crumb, and we had a great suspenseful moment waiting to see if the poison worked. I decided it should, and quickly, both to keep the game moving and because it was more fun to succeed with such a detailed plan. Dave stepped out of the office and drugged two more chimps, which got the attention of the guards below.

Rescuing the Kids

At this point hell breaks loose. Kai and Jimmy start freeing kids as fast as they can downstairs. The freed kids rush upstairs and mob the remaining guards. The upstairs kids realize this is their chance and start to free themselves. Dave gets backed into the upstairs office. He jumps out a window to escape, rolling a natural 20 for a perfect landing. By now kids are freeing one another. They round up the chimps and interrogate Crumb about the compass.

The Silver Gentleman's Tower

They take a dozen kids and head up the elevator to the storage level. I used the kids to explore the floor fast so they could head up to the next level without hesitation. Then they stopped in the silver man's office to look at some of his curiosities, and stole an hourglass. I tried to run them through this room as fast as possible.

The Silver Gentleman

In the confrontation the players were definitely expecting to take on and defeat this character. I felt bad about the railroading that had to happen here (we were a little over time) but the players seemed fascinated – and were freaking out as gravity stopped working. I think it created the out-of-control feeling I was looking for at this point. I didn't have time for the Tommy Ryerson Redux moment, but that's okay, it was a weak ending.

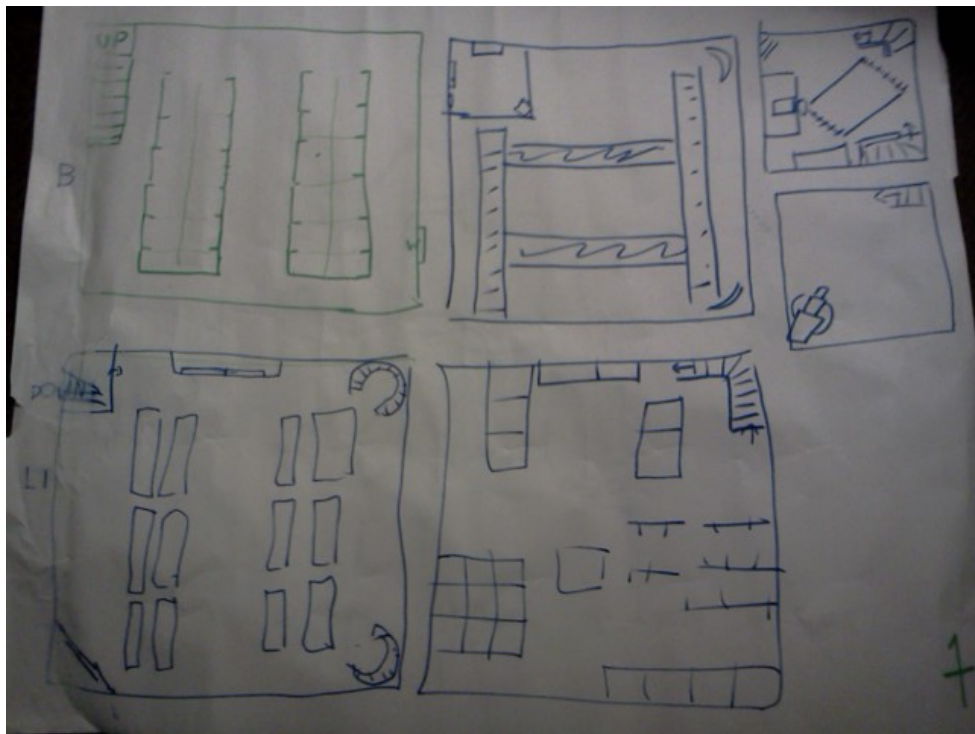
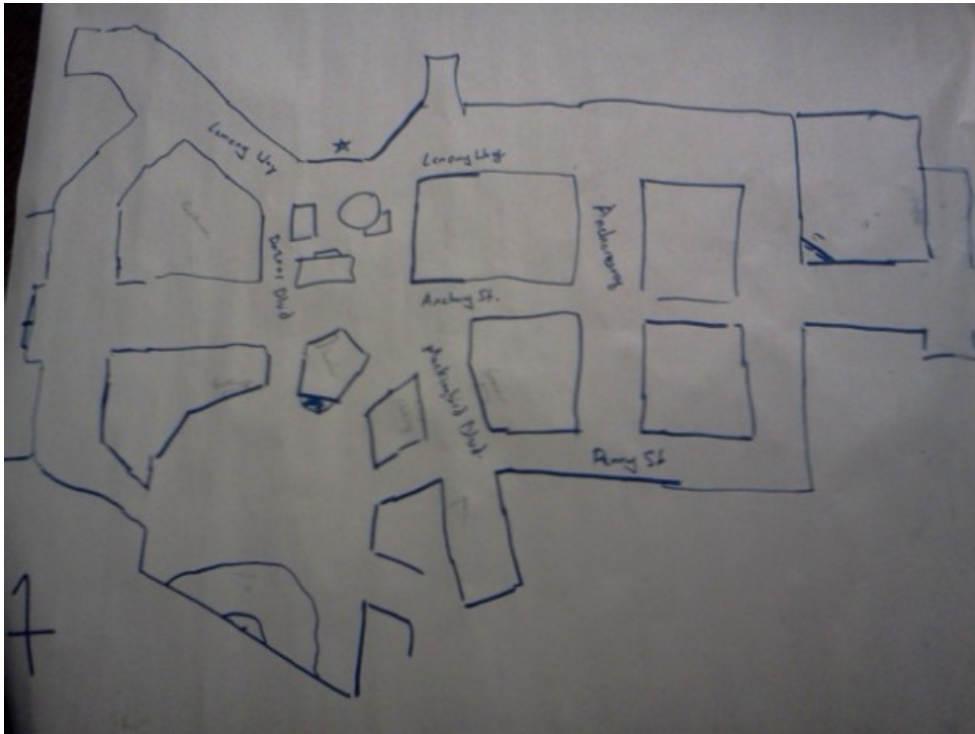
Timing

0:00 - Pre-game Q&A
0:06 - Game Begins - Tommy Ryerson (11 minutes)
0:17 - The Silver Swallow (4 minutes)
0:21 - Arrival in Pepper Knave (5 minutes)
0:26 - Chasing the Silver Man (14 minutes)
0:40 - Meeting Porthos (12 minutes)
0:52 - The Rag Hag (4 minutes)
0:56 - City Searching (14 minutes)
1:10 - Parker (5 minutes)
1:15 - Entering the Warehouse (17 minutes)
1:32 - The Trap! (14 minutes)
1:46 - Escaping the Cell (10 minutes)
1:56 - Regroup (8 minutes)
2:04 - Revenge on Parker (6 minutes)
2:10 - Plan the Raid (15 minutes)
2:25 - Sneaking In (9 minutes)
2:34 - Confronting Old Crumb (3 minutes)
2:37 - Rescuing the Kids (23 minutes)
3:00 - Silver Gentleman's Tower (4 minutes)
3:04 - The Silver Gentleman (6 minutes)
3:10 - Return to Morris Playground (1 minute)
3:11 - End of game

So act one took about 40 minutes, act two took about 60 minutes, and act three took about 90 minutes. To my great surprise, this is about the timing I predicted. My biggest surprise was how long the 'rescue the kids' block took. To be honest, that involved general cleanup of other bad guys in the area, so it makes sense. I very satisfied with how time was spent, especially in the middle- to end-game.

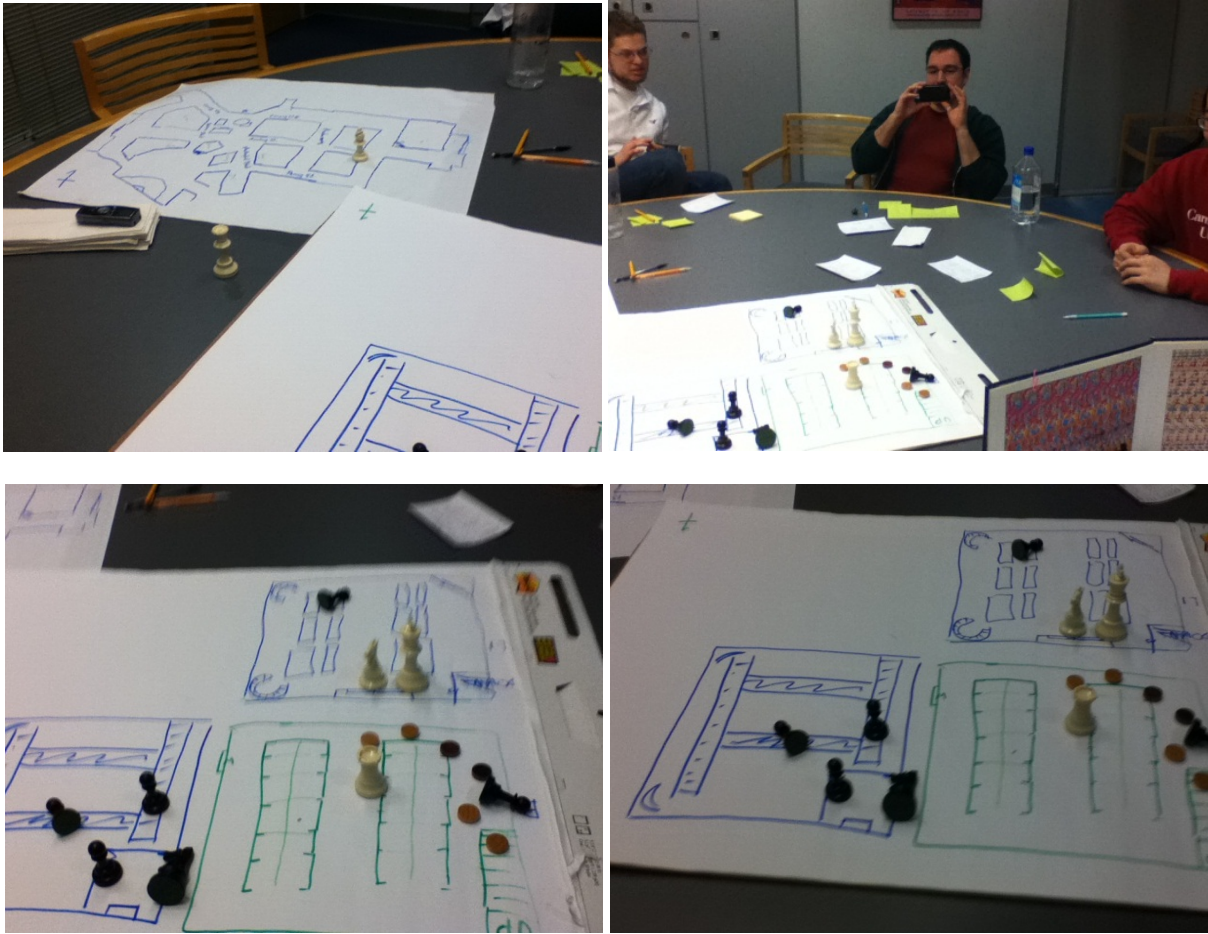
Photos

Maps, as drawn during the session:



Maps ended up approximately as planned. Notice shops added to the top map.

Session in progress, approximately 2:40 while rescuing kids



Alan (played by Dave, represented by the white knight) and James (played by Kai, represented by the white king) stand on the first floor by the elevator after Alan leaps from the office window on the second floor.

Alex (played by Jimmy, represented by the white rook) is in the basement, freeing imprisoned children (represented by the wooden checkers).

Graham (the white bishop) is visible standing guard outside, across from the main warehouse entrance.

Old Crumb (the black knight) and a number of subordinate chimps (black pawns) have been incapacitated. Two chimps on the second level are still active, one looking out the window where Alan just exited the office.

Interest Curves

The interest curves I received after the game were not as good as I hoped. Generally, players found the game interesting but the interest level did not build very cleanly. This is also difficult to analyze because my players gave me three very different curves.

My pre-game and post-game curves

My own post-game curve may have been a bit too optimistic, but it does show a decent interest curve with three climax points that get gradually more interesting. There are two major differences from my pre-game interest curve.

First, it shows that my in-game hook was very weak and all the way up to act 2 the interest level is much lower and flatter than I predicted. I didn't adequately anticipate the amount of up-front learning that would have to happen in my game. I also think that there was too much railroading in the first act – but without it, we might never have reached the better parts of my game.

Second, I reversed the importance of the two confrontations at the end. I had predicted that Crumb was a kind of sub-encounter and that the meeting with the Silver Man would be my showdown. In practice, tricking Crumb was a much more exciting moment than the confrontation with the Silver Man. I think this is because Crumb was a more concrete antagonist – the imprisoned kids made him an obvious bad guy, and he seemed within reach of the characters' capabilities. In fact, I think the players forgot about the Silver Man while they were worrying about Crumb. My story would have been stronger if Crumb was the primary antagonist from the beginning.

Player interest curves

The interest curves provided by my players were extremely different. I roughly normalized the curves and mapped them in Excel (shown at the end of this section) to get a sense of where they disagreed. I'm aware that this is an imperfect comparison, but it does reveal some trends. Let's start with the points of agreement

There are two points in the game that the players obviously agreed on as interest peaks, which are easy to find because they both have a standard deviation of less than 0.01.

- The arrival in Pepper Knave, when their characters left the real world and entered the fantasy world. Notice that my own interest curve indicates this as a low point – apparently the players were fully engaged, in spite of my own feeling that the game was moving slowly.
- The confrontation with Crumb, which took me by surprise but was definitely the high point of the game.

Next, look at the other local peaks on the average interest curve.

- Meeting Porthos was something of a high point. Once again my interest curve does not match the players' average. I felt like the conversation with Porthos was rough.
- The first entry into the warehouse. This part of the adventure was largely improvised – I had to make up a character for an imprisoned kid on the spot, and invent the locations of guards as the players went.
- The Silver Man's tower. This was intended as a transition space, but the players found it very interesting.

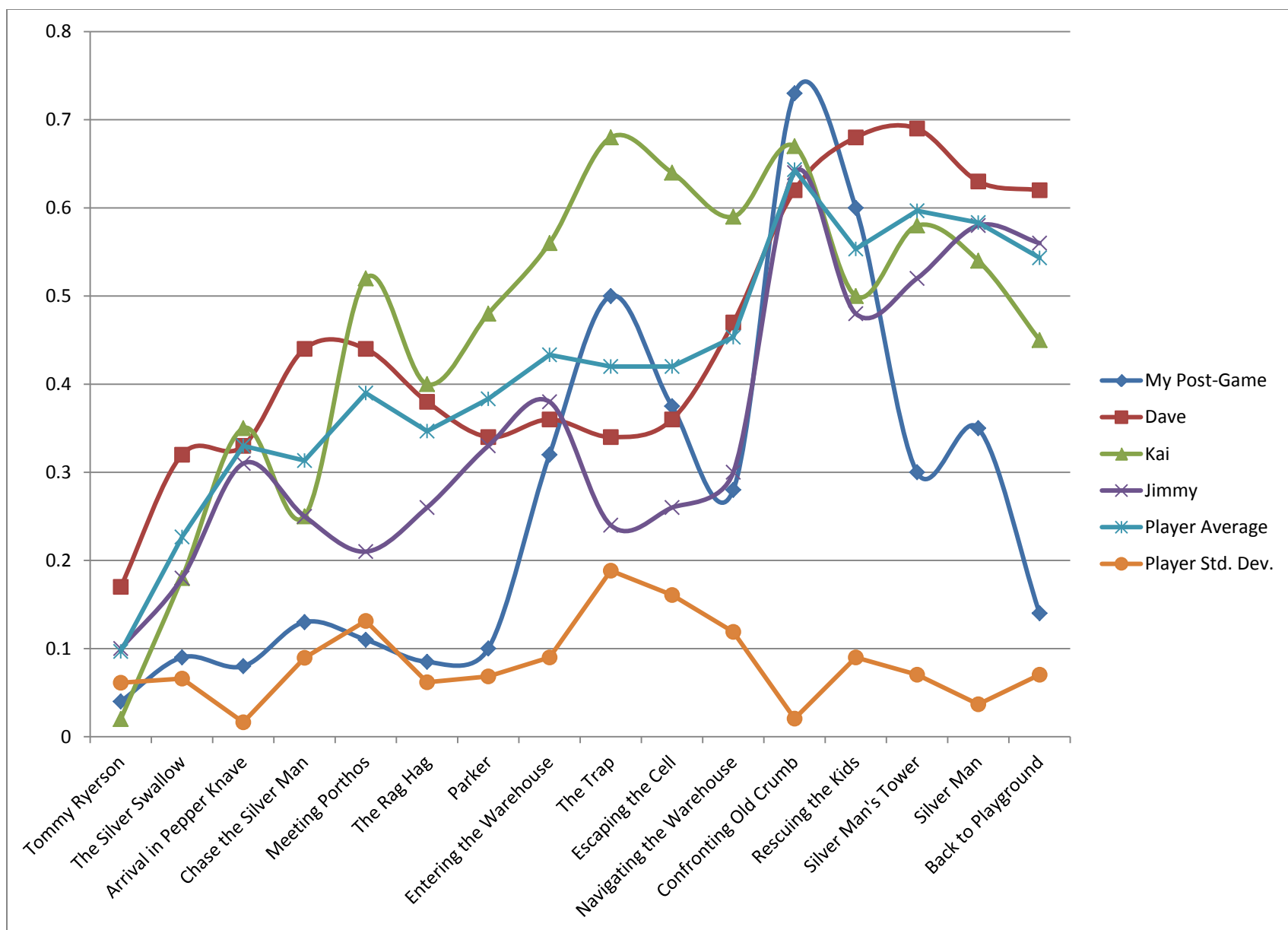
Either I made these areas too interesting (causing players to be unduly distracted by them) or maybe there's an inverse relationship between how much I planned and how much fun they had. That's not good! I'm tempted to cut out transition spaces like this – if it serves no purpose, what's the point? – but if players enjoyed it so much I should leave it in.

Now for the points where players disagreed.

- Kai and Dave enjoyed the meeting with Porthos, but Jimmy didn't like it. Jimmy strikes me as a very analytical person who got less out of the character encounters than the other players. Also, at this point in the game he was focused on investigating the area, and seemed impatient with the conversation he was railroaded into.
- The Trap went over great with Kai, okay with Dave and poorly with Jimmy. I think this is because they all had such different experiences with this moment. Dave broke off from the group before the trap was sprung, so he was hiding the whole time – this accounts for his average experience. Jimmy was caught flat-footed and had some poor rolls, so he was knocked out very quickly once the encounter began. For Kai, though, this was his moment to shine. He was playing the "fighter" character and should have been able to deal some damage at this point, and when he rolled a natural 1 that ended his chance it was at least worth a good laugh.
- Rescuing the Kids was a major dip in interest for Kai and Jimmy, but to Dave it was as good as confronting Crumb. I think this is both due to Dave's personality (more likely to enjoy social interactions) and to his character's high leadership skill (easy choice for directing a newfound crowd of minions).

Here it looks like Jimmy was a bit underserved as a player, while the other two found elements tailored to them. The story element I designed for Alex (Jimmy's character), the stolen compass, did not come out as dominant as I hoped and it did not give him a chance to really show off his intellectual skills. I really did think of Alex as the main character, but Alan was more dominant.

That said, Jimmy experienced a sound, three-peak structure with peaks at the arrival, entering the warehouse, and confronting Crumb. Kai seems to have experienced a five-peak structure with peaks at the arrival, Porthos, the trap, confronting Crumb, and the tower. Dave seems to have had the most broken experience (though to watch him play you'd think he was having the most fun) with real peaks at the end of the chase and rescuing the kids, and a slow mid-game.



Conclusion

On the whole, this attempt at creating an interactive story was a limited success. During the game I felt like I was doing too much railroading, and the ending for the players was largely determined. However, I got the impression that the players felt a great deal of freedom within the game, and indeed they determined their path to the ending in ways I did not expect.

Given more development time I would design a bit more detail into the world, so that I was more prepared when the players stepped outside my plans and explored the world in detail.

With another short development cycle I would at least try to make the game more open from the beginning. I want the players to feel more freedom. Of course I run the risk of the players missing the main storyline; I would need to use the environment more (and some improvised hints) to nudge the players in the right direction. In retrospect this would have worked just fine, since the players had such a strong instinct to explore the environment anyway.

I was not happy with my ending, and next time I would spend more time making sure the game had a good strong ending where the players feel powerful, not helpless. I also need to put more work into my indirect control techniques, because the stolen object conceit did not turn out to be a strong draw for my players.

In spite of the challenges, the game went well and all involved had a good time. I would not count this as one of my game design strengths, but I do want to try it again.