SWIFT SAGA™

Role-Playing Game

Gamemaster's Guide

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The Gamemaster's Role

Swift Saga RPG relies on one player acting as the Gamemaster, or GM. The role of a GM can be divided into two main jobs: Designing Adventures and Running Adventures.

Designing Adventures

As a GM, one of your jobs is to design adventures. It's tricky to get the hang of it at first, so many GMs start with published adventures or adapt stories they're fond of. There isn't a Right Way to design a fun adventure, but the game system will certainly get in your way if you're trying to design an adventure for which it isn't well-suited. Swift Saga was designed with a certain adventure in mind. More on this in a bit.

Running Adventures

Running an adventure can be seen as directing a play, except you're also acting as a few of the extras, the set designer, and the guy in charge of lights and sound. You set the stage, give the players their cues, and respond to their actions. Depending on what they do, you may have to hastily create new locations or new non-Player Characters (NPCs) for them to interact with. *Collaborative entertainment is the goal!* Remain open to ideas from your players and you'll end up experiencing a story none of you expected.

GM: "You arrive at a crossroads. A large tree grows here, and in its shade several merchants have set up stalls."

Ann: "According to the map, we need to head north..."

Chuck: (To Ann) "Hold on! We have been walking all day! I would like some refreshment." (To the GM) "What do the merchants sell?"

GM (Improvising): "Oh...fruit and vegetables."

Chuck: "What kind of fruit? Do they have anything to drink here?"

Barry: "Yeah, I'm looking for some healing herbs."

Ann: "Hey, remember the Dark Lord who's threatening the kingdom? Anybody? To the north?"

GM (Assuming the 'older' voice of a merchant): "Hello travelers. Can I help you?"

Chuck (Proudly): "I am Lord Arthur of Wolfan--ow!" (Ann has kicked Chuck under the table) "Excuse me, good merchant." (To Ann) "What is your problem?"

Ann: "Lord Druid, I feel compelled to remind you that we are incognito."

Barry: (To Ann) "You were just shouting about the Dark Lord to everyone around here. Anyway, we have 'adventurers' stamped on our foreheads."

Ann: "I wasn't shouting! Wait. That gives me an idea…"

Barry (To GM): "Well met, good merchant. Do you sell herbs with healing properties?"

GM (To Barry, in the merchant's voice): "I might have something...have you heard of..." (Improvising) "...Gammari Root?"

Barry: "Have I?"

GM (Decides there is no need for dice): "Your Intellect is high enough, definitely you've heard of it. It doesn't so much heal as...make you forget you're hurt."

Barry: "Ha! I think I've had that before. I'll take that."

(Meanwhile, Ann and Chuck have been scheming...)

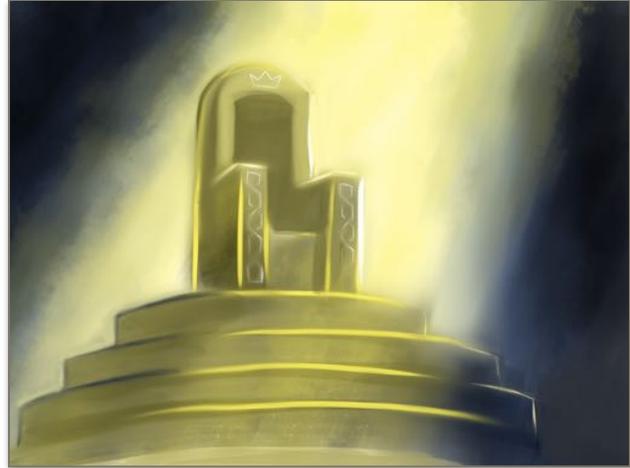> Chuck: "Good merchant, how much for your business?"
>
> GM: "I offer good prices on fresh vegetables, and -"
>
> Chuck: "No, no, I don't think you understand me. I'd like to buy ALL of it. The whole lot. The wagon, your horses, all of it. Name your price."
>
> GM (No longer in merchant-voice): "What's going on?"
>
> Ann: "We're going to sneak into the Dark Lord's kingdom as merchants!"
>
> GM: "Ah! Nice!"

(The GM considers the situation. It's entertaining and it advances the plot. It could certainly be argued that Chuck's character has the money as a **Lord in Exile**. To speed things along, though, the GM opts to narrate the negotiation. The GM knows the real fun with this plan will be talking their way past the Dark Lord's guards!)

> GM: "Arthur, your Charisma is high enough that you can get a good deal, rip him off, or leave him well compensated."
>
> Chuck: "I'll just go for a good deal."
>
> GM: "Okay, so a little while later the three of you are riding down the road toward the dark kingdom in a horse drawn-vegetable cart, dressed as merchants."
>
> Barry (to Ann and Chuck): "What have you two gotten us into?"

Running adventures also requires you to act as a kind of referee. The Player Characters have great power, but that Power is constrained by the rules. These constraints are intended to align with our expectations of a fantasy setting, but also to be *creative* constraints. The rules can be terse at times and require adjudication - that's your job. You have the final word on how to interpret the rules. The nature of Swift Saga - intended for short games of a singular nature - means you don't have to sweat it that much. If a player wants her character to do something the rules don't seem to cover, ask yourself a couple of questions: "What would be cool and heroic?" and "What will advance the story?" Always figure out a way to say "Yes" even if you have to follow it with a "but..." or an "and..."

> GM: "Nelunus, the jailor slams the gate shut! 'The magistrate will see you in the morning!' He storms off, taking the light with him. You can still see, of course, being a Deep Dwarf."
>
> Barry: "I listen carefully. Once he's left the cell block, I'm going to slip these shackles."
>
> GM: "How, exactly?"
>
> Barry: "I'm assuming it works like a Setback? Can I roll Agility? Hey, wait..." (Looking at his cards) "'Iron Fist' says my hands are super-hardened and resistant to pain. I'm just going to squeeze 'em out. Use Strength instead!"

(Barry is angling to roll a better Stat. As long as the player comes up with sound reasoning, the GM should be open to this kind of problem solving. It's part of the fun!)

> GM (Thinking): Sure, that will work. Give me a Strength Feat."
>
> Barry: (Rolling) "Yeah! I got 3 Successes!"
>
> GM: "That will do it - you force your super-hardened fists through the shackles, warping them in the process. Now what?"

> *Barry: "Um...can I use my Deep Dwarf 'Doorway through Shadow' power?"*

(This is a great use for the Deep Dwarf's power, but the GM notes that the power requires shadows. The guard took the light away with him. Rather than just say 'No' the GM spells out why it won't work. After all, Nelunus might opt to create light somehow.)

> *GM: "No light means no shadows, though."*

> *Barry: "Bah! Okay. Hey, how about just blasting them open. Use 'Eldritch Blast' on my Sorcerer card?"*

(Nothing on the Sorcerer card says Eldritch Blast can be used to blast objects - but why not? After all, a warrior could bash the gate with a hammer.)

> *GM: "I don't see why not. How are you doing it, exactly?"*

> *Barry: "I'm assuming it makes noise, so I'm going to go right up to the lock, point blank, and try to muffle the sound as best I can!"*

> *GM: "Let's call it an Intellect Feat, then."*

> *Barry: "I LOVE Intellect Feats. Boom! 4 Successes."*

> *GM: "There is a flash of light and a sound like a battering ram. The lock is obliterated and the cage door flies open. You're pretty sure that was loud enough to be heard upstairs, though."*

> *Barry: "Let them come! They'll wish they never captured me!*

What is a Swift Saga Adventure?

As has been stated, aligning an adventure with your game system makes it easier to design and run. So what is a Swift Saga Adventure?

It Leaves a Lot Out.

Swift Saga is designed to run singular fantasy adventures, or event gaming (one-shots, conventions, etc.). Because of this, it eschews rules for skills development ("leveling") and equipment choice/acquisition ("loot") as irrelevant. For many fantasy role-players, their character's progression - the development of their character over weeks, months, years - is what appeals to them most about the genre, but Swift Saga leaves all of that out. *The system assumes you will have only 4-5 hours to run your adventure.*

It Begins in the Middle.

The backstory that explains the current situation is presented as an introduction to the adventure, and ends with the heroes well on their way. Why? In-character exposition and planning take a long time and risk derailing the adventure before it starts. Ask yourself this question: if there are no real choices for the heroes to make - that is, if the adventure hinges on the heroes accepting an important mission from the Queen - then why role-play it? *Skip to the middle!* The heroes have accepted the mission, saddled up, and are arriving where the real adventure begins. *In other words, skip to where the heroes DO have meaningful choices to make.*

The Player Characters are the Heroes.

The player characters are absolutely THE heroes of the adventure and essential to its resolution. There shouldn't be other good guys more powerful than the heroes - and anyone more powerful than the heroes should be a villain to strive against. Don't worry about making the villains obvious, either.

The Setting Supports the Adventure.

Swift Saga doesn't mandate a setting - so you don't have to use one, either. Unless you have a setting you'd like to use, start with a story idea and create a setting to support it. Remove any cards from the deck that don't

fit in. Add enough details to create the illusion of a world off-stage, but not so much that you confuse the narrative. It's the natural tendency of players to see each detail as extremely relevant to the adventure at-hand. Use details as signposts for the adventure, and leave out description that might send the players on a wild goose chase.

The Stakes are Huge.

Fantasy adventures come in all sizes, but Swift Saga Adventures should always be big - at the very least, **kingdoms should be threatened by invasion or destruction.** The whole world, time stream, or dimension should be in peril if you can work it in. Don't have a dragon threaten a village or town when it could threaten a sprawling capitol city. And as long as you're having the dragon attack a capitol, why not have it happen during a critical peace negotiation? Every warring kingdom has ambassadors present! Does the dragon act alone? Is one of the ambassadors behind it? Whenever you have a chance to up the stakes, do so! Swift Saga leaves a lot out so you can put a lot of other things in…!

There's a Lot of Action.

Just looking at the cards tells you this. Even the weakest character combinations are still pretty dangerous, and it's quite likely that at least one character will be absurdly dangerous. **The system assumes there will be at least a couple of dynamic battles pitting the heroes against scores of enemy minions and monstrous creatures.** Don't hesitate to give the bad guys reinforcements if things are going too easy. It should never be a foregone conclusion that all of the player characters will survive!

Designing Adventures

Given the assumptions that Swift Saga makes, let's look at how to design adventures for it.

Adventure Structure

Swift Saga adventures begin with the players independently creating characters (see the Player's Guide). Next, there is an introduction that sets the stage for what is to come. Once everyone has made their introductions, begin with the first scene that places the heroes on the *threshold of the unknown.*

At this point, create a set of interconnected locations and challenges, careful to avoid a linear path to the end. *At first it should seem like the world is vast - but each scene should narrow down the field of possible choices like a funnel, driving the Player Characters toward the Final Scene and its resolution.* You could argue it's still linear and perhaps it is - but the key is that it shouldn't *feel* linear to the players.

At each locale, place some form of challenge - be it Social, Environmental, or Combat-related in nature - that must be overcome in order to reveal the next step. *Create more content than you need* so you can leave stuff out if the game begins to drag. Remember you can always use those ideas in another game!

In general, the number of scenes required to create a fun adventure is FAR fewer than you think, and you only need a couple of battles for the players to feel powerful and heroic. *Remember the players will bring a lot of their own energy and ideas to the game, and you need to leave yourself open to feed off of that energy.* If you're too focused on running the complete adventure you run the risk of your game running too long.

If you're accustomed to running longer-form, open-ended adventures in other fantasy role-playing systems, this probably sounds like TOO MUCH structure. Nothing prevents you from running open-ended games with Swift Saga; these guidelines, like the system itself, assume short gaming opportunities.

Social Challenges

A good adventure includes more than just slaying monsters. It's important to have at least one scene - regardless of the overall themes of the adventure - devoted to interacting with non-player characters. These are encounters where Charisma-heavy characters have an opportunity to shine.

Speaking in Character

It helps set the mood of the game for everyone to speak in character as much as possible, but scenes with non-player characters will especially fall flat if everyone is simply narrating what they want to have happen. Compare *"I convince the guard to let me pass,"* with *"I'm sorry I'm late for duty - I'm the new guard! Which way to the barracks?"* Ask the players to speak in their character's voice and try to role-play the act of lying, giving speeches, and so on - even if they're not accustomed to doing so in real life.

Encourage role-playing by rewarding it - give players bonus dice or successes for creative voices, making everyone laugh, or evoking genuine emotion. A player who is a recluse in real life might end up playing a character with a Charisma of 8. Your only requirement of him should be that he TRY to speak in character. No sticks, just carrots - don't penalize him if he doesn't feel comfortable.

NPCs as Challenges

Try to decide in advance what Noteworthy (3-4 Successes) and Legendary Feats (5+ Successes) do in a pre-planned social encounter. A Noteworthy Feat should generally move the adventure along (e.g., the guards let them pass), whereas a Legendary Feat obtains a short-term advantage of some kind (e.g., the guards give them directions or key information). More elaborate negotiations are better structured as Open CHA Feats, especially if all the heroes are pitching in - with each attempt having some negative consequence. Don't make a challenge impossible, and always have some idea what the heroes will do if they can't beat it.

Open Feats and Social Challenges

You can play with the dice mechanics to introduce tension into a Social Challenge. One way to do this is with the *Open Feat* - in which multiple rolls from multiple players contribute to a total that needs to beat a target. In this example, our heroes are trying to convince the Crystal Order to lend them a powerful artifact. The GM has decided that the heroes will get 3 CHA rolls to make it to a total of 10 Successes. After 3 attempts, the Crystal Order will expel the heroes from their presence. If that happens, the GM already has another option planned, one that involves a rooftop heist.

> GM: *"At last you are led before the Grand Magister of the Crystal Order. He sits on a glittering crystal throne, surrounded by elder wizards." (Taking on a different voice) "Why do you intrude on our realm?"*

> Chuck: *(To Ann and Barry) "Leave this to me." (To GM) "Grand Magister, please forgive our intrusion, but these are desperate times and we...we must ask your assistance in a matter of...grave importance."*

> GM: *"Nice. This will be an Open Charisma Feat requiring 10 Successes."*

> Chuck: *"Okay, Noble and Lord of Exile give me 7 dice. Can I use my 'Making Speeches' Trait?"*

> GM: *"Ha, most definitely!"*

Chuck: "And Lord's Retinue - it says 'Court Protocol' is Epic?"

GM: "Go for it."

Chuck: "Right, so that's 8 dice, Epic." (Rolls dice) "4 Successes."

GM: "Excellent." (In other voice) "WE shall be the judge of what is important! State your request, and be quick about it!"

Barry: "Why did we come here? These guys are annoying."

Ann: "Shh!"

GM: "Barry, roll Nelunus' Charisma."

(This is the Live Microphone trick. Is everything that's said at the table "out loud" in the game? Of course not! Except when it's too perfect to pass up...)

Barry: "No, wait, I didn't say that out loud!"

GM: "Are you kidding? I think that's <u>exactly</u> what Nelunus did! Have you MET you?"

Barry: "But I only have a Charisma of 1!"

Everyone Else: "Exactly!"

Chuck: "Ugh! Ok, Nelunus, remember Arthur is so cool you get a +1 to your roll. You're part of my 'Retinue' you know."

Barry: (Rolls 2 dice) "Well at least I got 1 Success."

GM: (In other voice) "We suggest you silence your 'friend', Lord of Wolfan, lest you wish to be exiled from OUR realm."

Chuck: (To Barry) "Jeez! My first decent roll of this game and you're screwing it up for me!"

Barry: "It could have been worse!"

GM: (In other voice) "Speak, Lord Druid!"

Chuck: "Ah, I beg your pardon, Grand Magister, my ally has traveled many leagues across dangerous lands and is weary. Hey - GM, can I just say that I bring them up to speed on the backstory?"

GM: "Sure - assume you do that. Let's skip to the actual request."

Chuck: "So we come to you, in our hour of need, to request the Amulet of Seven Worlds, that we might travel to the City on the Edge of Time and bring Lord Onyx to justice!" (Rolling) "6 Successes!"

Ann and Barry: "Nice!"

GM: "Your cause is noble, Lord of Wolfan, and we will grant your request."

Always Know what Non-Player Characters Want

Don't make a non-player character impossible to interact with if the heroes *have* to interact with him. A ferryman who charges a king's ransom to cross a river should be subject to haggling, deception, *something*. **What is it that he wants, and can the heroes possibly provide it?** Don't be surprised if the player characters resort to *violence* if you put them in a no-win social encounter, *especially* in a one-shot adventure!

Environmental Challenges

Obstacles

Labyrinths, pools of red-hot lava, and hazardous weather always seem to lie between the heroes and their goal. Unless a Power can be used to circumvent the situation, the heroes will overcome these challenges using Feats. Give bonuses for teamwork, calling out Traits, and even certain combinations of cards. A Forest Elf Druid should have a difficult time getting lost in a forest, *even though nothing on his cards states this.* If players ask to retroactively possess useful equipment (climbing gear, etc.) that makes sense given their card combination, say yes, and allow a couple of bonus dice if applicable.

The goal of these kinds of dangers is to ramp up tension and encourage teamwork. This happens naturally when the danger must be passed one person at a time. Say you're asking for STR Feats to jump a pit, and it's becoming clear that 3 Successes are needed to so successfully. The heroes are jumping one at a time, and it comes time for the weakling of the group to go - that's fun tension and a great role-playing opportunity! The heroes who have leapt successfully all wait on the far side, ready to help...

Upping the Ante

Is the situation too easy? What if the climbing gear the player characters asked for turns out to be in poor condition? (The first time it's used, it provides 2 bonus dice...the second time, just one...the third time, it snaps!) What if a goblin patrol shows up on the other side? What if a sudden earthquake causes the pit to widen?

In the next example, a rickety rope bridge spans a bottomless chasm. It clearly can't take more than one hero at a time. The GM has decided crossing the bridge without snapping a board is an Agility Feat requiring Successes equal to the hero's Strength - in effect, penalizing bulkier characters. If the player fails to roll enough Successes, a Noteworthy Agility Feat provides a final chance at survival. The GM takes advantage of how the scene plays out to *Up the Ante* and turn it into an adventure movie.

> *GM: "The jungle parts before you, and the path leads to a rickety rope bridge over a deep chasm."*
>
> *Ann: "I look down."*
>
> *GM: "You think you hear the distant sound of rushing water, but from this height all you see is mist."*
>
> *Ann: "How far across?"*
>
> *GM: "It's long...3 Areas or so."*
>
> *Barry: "What's the bridge made out of?"*
>
> *GM: "Woven vines. It looks really old. The boards don't look particularly safe. You're not even sure it will hold more than one of you at a time."*
>
> *Chuck: "We have no choice - this is the way to the oracle. I'll go first."*
>
> *GM: "Arthur begins traversing the bridge. This is an Agility Feat. You need a number of Successes equal to your Strength."*
>
> *Chuck: "And on failure?"*
>
> *GM: "Each time you fail, a board snaps, and you need a 3 Successes to keep from falling."*

Ann: "Alright, I was born for this! I have an Agility of 8 and a Strength of 2!"

Barry: "And I'm doomed! I have an Agility of 3 and a Strength of 7!"

Chuck: "And my Agility and Strength are BOTH 3." (Gulps) "Right, here we go." (Rolls) "Only 1 Success!"

GM: "Arthur makes it about 20 feet across when a board snaps, and he begins to fall! Arthur, you need 3 Successes..."

Chuck: "I'll spend a Willpower to Overcome Adversity..." (Rolls dice) "I only scored 1 Success again!"

GM: "Arthur plummets into the mist below."

Ann and Barry: "Noooo!"

Chuck: (Places a token on his Druid card) "I change to a bird."

GM: (Thinking) "Okay, that will work." (To Ann and Barry) "But you guys don't know that. You think he's dead."

Barry: "Bah! It's a miracle that fool lasted this long!"

Ann: "Be quiet! I'm going next, and I'm going to carry a rope with me so I can save your heavy butt. I can't believe we didn't do that before."

(3 Areas equals more than 90' of rope - which no one has mentioned up until this point - but the GM allows its inclusion. It makes sense that a Ranger traveling in the mountainous jungle would have rope.)

Ann: (Rolling) "I easily get 2 Successes."

GM: "Right - you make it to the far end and tie the rope in place."

Ann: (To Barry in a loud voice) "Okay, come on!"

Barry: "I'm going to run as fast as I can!"

GM and Ann: "What?"

Barry: "I figure there is no way I'm going to score 7 Successes before a board snaps and I fall, so I want to be as far over the bridge as possible when that happens. Besides, this way I can use my Attacking the Darkness trait for an extra die."

GM: "Yes you can!"

*Ann: (To Barry) "You're going to **die**, and leave me alone in this godforsaken jungle!"*

Barry: (To Ann) "What's the worst that can happen?" (Rolling dice) "Well, predictably, I get maybe 5 feet across the bridge before a board snaps."

GM: "Your rope holds, but has the effect of snapping every other board in the bridge as you swing in a long arc toward the rocky cliff wall on the far side! Meanwhile, Edwina..."

Ann: "Yes? I'm standing here with my mouth open, watching my sorcerer die in the most ridiculous fashion imaginable."

(At this point the GM sees that all 3 heroes are separated, which is always a good time to introduce a monster of some kind.)

GM: "Edwina, you are ambushed from behind by a lizard-man!"

Ann: "No, I'm not - as a Ranger I'm never Surprised in the wilderness."

GM: "That's right! Good call." (Rolls dice) "You duck the lizard-man's axe, but he cuts the rope instead!"

Ann, Chuck, and Barry: "Noooo!"

GM: (To Chuck) "That's your cue."

(The GM is asking Chuck to describe his sudden reappearance.)

Chuck: "A brightly colored...tropical...bird of prey...like a falcon-tiel..."

Ann: "A what?"

*Chuck: "Whatever it is, it's beautiful **and** deadly, and it swoops down to attack the lizard-man!" (To GM) "I'm really just trying to fly in its face as a distraction to buy time." (To Ann) "Rawwwrk!"*

GM: "Fair enough - no roll needed! Edwina, what are you doing?"

Ann: "Where is the rope?"

GM: "It's sliding across the jungle floor toward the lip of the chasm."

Barry: "What about me?"

GM: "You're hurtling toward the cliff wall - you can't tell the rope has been cut yet."

Barry: "This is going to hurt, isn't it?"

GM: "Yes, you'll need a 3 Successes on a Strength Feat, or you'll be Wounded from the impact."

Barry: "Can I use Eldritch Shield to absorb the impact?"

GM: "Sure. As you near the cliff you hold out a hand and magical energy cushions you against the impact!"

Barry: "Okay, I'll spend 2 Willpower to keep it in reserve."

GM: "At this point, it becomes clear to you the rope isn't actually fastened to anything. You bounce off the wall, briefly suspended in air…"

Barry: "Arrrgh! Why do I travel with you people?!!"

Ann: (Places a Token on Half-Clockwork) "I'm Overclocking. I have a whopping Strength of 2, but that means it gives me two physical Actions in one Turn. First, I'm going to shoot the lizard man with my bow - I'm assuming he's Blinded by the beautiful bird?"

GM: "Yes. Give yourself 2 Bonus Successes."

Ann: (Rolls 8 dice) "I score 5 total."

(The GM didn't actually have Stats for the lizard-man - the whole thing was improvised. As such, he had already decided that any Noteworthy attack - 3 Successes or more - would kill it.)

GM: "Your arrow pierces it in the throat!"

Ann: "Now I'm going to run and grab the rope, then use my clockwork arm to...grab a vine."

GM: "Your Agility is high enough to catch the rope and a vine, no problem, but Nelunus is pretty heavy!"

Ann: "Ugh, do I have a choice?"

GM: "Roll your Strength?"

Ann: "Just 1 Success!"

GM: "You're holding the rope, but you feel as if your clockwork innards are going to be ripped apart! You hear springs, uh, sproinging!"

Chuck: "I'll change back to human form and help."

Ann: "It's about time, your Lordship!"

GM: "Okay, between the two of you, you're able to haul Nelunus up the cliff."

Barry: "Nelunus brushes himself off." (To Ann & Chuck) "Well, that wasn't so hard, was it?" (To Chuck) "You even suck at dying?"

Traps

Mechanical and magical traps - pits, poisoned darts, exploding runes, and so forth - should be used sparingly. (If you want to slow your adventure to a crawl, all you have to do is litter it with traps. Soon the whole game has been reduced to poking everything with a 10-foot pole.) Aren't they part of the genre, though? *That they are!* Here are some guidelines for using traps that might seem counter-intuitive:

- **Put a big "Traps are Here" sign on the door.** It should be obvious where the traps are located. That pile of bones *could* be a clue! (Nearly every trap in adventure movies is of this variety.) If the players insist on proceeding without caution, you've done what you can. No one can accuse you of a sucker punch.

- **Allow multiple ways to circumvent the trap.** Make it a *puzzle*. Once the heroes have discovered a trap, there should be a couple of ways to get by it, each calling for a Feat. Disarming traps isn't solely the province of Rogue-like characters - any character with tools and suitable Intellect has a chance of disabling a mechanism.

If a trap is triggered, either by negligence or because there isn't time to disarm it, then allow a Noteworthy or Legendary AGI Feat to avoid a Wound (or other Setback).

In the example below, the GM has placed floor spikes in the entrance to a tomb. He has decided that anyone unfortunate enough to run in will need a Legendary AGI Feat to avoid injury, but it doesn't come to that...

GM: "Edwina, the floor of this tomb is littered with bones."

Ann: "Hold it everyone. Can I tell how they died?"

GM: "Not really - none of them died recently - but you're pretty sure they weren't killed by a beast or monster."

Chuck: "I'm looking at the floor and ceiling. I have an Intellect of 6."

GM: "You see holes in the floor, regularly placed."

(Note the GM is just freely giving out information here, because the players are asking appropriate questions. No dice have been rolled.)

Barry: "Can I just toss an Eldritch Bolt out there on the floor somewhere?"

Ann: "I'm taking a step back..."

Chuck: "Me too!"

GM: "Nelunus fires a bolt of mystical energy, and it hits the floor. There is a loud click and a set of long spikes shoots upward toward the ceiling!"

Barry: "Yikes! How long?"

GM: "Long enough. While you're watching, there is a clicking sound, and then the spikes begin ratcheting downward."

Chuck: "Can we just move through the spikes while they're up?"

GM: "It will be a tight fit and you'll have to be quick about it. It takes them about 5 seconds to ratchet back into place and become 'live' again. But it's possible."

Barry: "Nelunus could use 'Doorway through Shadow' to get to the other side and look for an off switch."

Ann: "No, save it - I'm small and fast. Trigger it, and I'll run through and find the off switch."

Ideas for Obstacles & Traps

- Someone knowledgeable about caves can tell this cavern fills with water during the rains, and quickly - in minutes the water will be up to the heroes' chests. Vines from a natural chimney might be their only escape, lest they be whisked down a deadly whirlpool to oblivion...or a long-sought buried treasure...

- The blackened passage's glowing vents periodically light up with raging flames - only by patiently watching for the pattern can someone safely navigate the tunnel without being incinerated! But who can be patient while the ground is shaking! Isn't this volcano about to erupt?

- Sailing to the islands is easier said than done - the straits are a maze of reefs and dangerous currents. One bad call and your raft will end up dashed on the rocks with sharks circling! The old man knows the safe route, if only someone could understand what he was saying!

- The chasm is bridged by a giant hollow log; the road continues through its mushroom-lined interior, but sections of it have begun to give way, and giant spiders lie in wait. Crossing on top of the log is possible, but it is slick with cold moisture from the nearby falls, and every step is treacherous!

- Islands of buoyant rock drift on eerie clouds, unmoored from gravity, the result of a spell that went haywire centuries ago. Jumping on a rock sends it drifting and spinning, and keeping one's balance requires quick thinking. It's only a matter of time before one rock collides with another, and the hero must jump at just the right time or be shaken off - or sent in the wrong direction!

- It turns out that some of the stone blocks in this maze can be pushed, sliding across the smooth marble floor to open up new sections of the maze. In some cases, the block sinks into the ground, or blocks lower from the ceiling. Is it possible that the blocks have to be arranged in a certain way to get out of this place?

- A whooshing sound signals the beginning of a series of swinging scythes that cut through the passage every few feet. Each blade falls at different intervals, requiring a would-be intruder to stop short, lest he lose a nose! Yet there is a pattern - torches at the entrance of the tunnel flicker when the sequence begins, which is the most advantageous time to bolt down the corridor. At least, that's what the glyphs on the wall seem to suggest....IF they've been translated correctly!

- There are two stone causeways over the flames, but they are balanced - if the weight on the two bridges isn't roughly equal, one bridge rises into the ceiling of spikes, while the other lowers into the fire!

- The stone doors to the round chamber slam shut, and it begins to spin slowly. As it picks up steam, spikes extend from holes in the walls! It's only a matter of time before the heroes are slung into the wall at high speed and impaled! Surely in the middle of the room, where it spins, there is a secret panel that turns it off...

- The floor before the statue is covered with runes that show the alchemical elements, and the stones one steps on will result in a potentially dangerous explosion of poisonous gas, electricity, from the statue's caduceus. Only one who knows a harmless combination of elements can traverse the floor. There are so many, however, that one must calculate potential combinations in mid-stride!

On Powers that "Break" Puzzles & Traps

This is yet *another* reason to always have more content than you need for an adventure! Some heroes can fly, turn insubstantial, or teleport. These Powers alone allow easy circumvention of many traps and obstacles, and that's *fine*. That's what makes them valuable Powers to have, after all!

Combat Challenges

The third kind of challenge is combat. There should be at least one combat challenge to justify all the weapons the heroes are carting around, but 3 battles normally round an adventure out:

- **The Intro Battle.** One relatively easy fight (early in the game) for the heroes to test their mettle and help set the mood for the adventure. This should take no longer than 15 minutes of play time to resolve.

- **The Big Brawl.** A large-scale battle that stretches the limits of what the heroes can handle. *The heroes should be able to avoid this battle using stealth, trickery, diplomacy, etc.* This should take no more than 30-40 minutes play time to resolve.

- **The Final Battle.** Against a unique enemy, on a treacherous precipice, during a storm, while the stars are aligned. A fight in which "Get him!" is not a valid strategy. *There should be a trick to it.* This should take 30 minutes, an hour at most (see Bosses).

Each battle you include in your adventure should advance the plot of the adventure in some way. Perhaps the enemies are carrying a secret message, guarding a magical key needed to open a gate, or driving the heroes toward an ambush? *The enemies should have a clear goal, and their defeat makes a difference to what comes next.*

Choosing the Battleground

Take care not to neglect the space where the battle will take place. What are its special features, and how do they affect the battle?

- **Entrances & Exits:** How hard is it to get into or out of the fight? Can the heroes flee if it becomes too much? Can the enemies? How hard is it for you to introduce additional creatures from "just off stage" if the fight is easier than you planned?

- **Cover & Darkness:** How much cover is available? Shadows? Fog? Crowds of innocent bystanders? Attacking a creature with cover is subject to a -2 penalty (at least).

- **Hazardous Terrain:** Leaving an Area that has been designated Hazardous Terrain (e.g., rocky debris, icy ground, etc.) requires the combatant to spend 1 DP.

- **Special Features or Obstacles:** What if the battleground takes place on ground sacred to an evil god, and all Magic Powers used by non-worshippers are subject to a -2 penalty? What if the battle takes place near an active fault line, and every X Turns, tremors cause every creature to perform a Noteworthy AGI Feat or fall to the ground, losing 1 DP?

Choosing the Enemies

The creatures the heroes have to fight should fit with the plot and setting you have chosen. *Monsters & Other Adversaries* (available at PlayTinyEpic.com) contains dozens of creatures for use in your adventures. Each monster in *Monsters & Other Adversaries* may be described as a **Squad**, an **Elite**, and/or a **Boss**.

Squads

A Squad is a multitude of creatures of a certain type. The number of creatures that can form a single Squad is dependent on their size (see the Size chart). For example, 15 medium-sized creatures can form a Squad. Nearly any sort of creature can be formed into Squads. Don't let the term mislead you; they are not necessarily *organized* in the sense of a military unit–rather, they're clumped together to make it easier for the GM to run large-scale battles. Squads are the weakest variant of a creature, and have Defenses between 2-4. *Use Squads in The Big Brawl.*

Elites

An Elite is a tougher version of a creature that benefits from better equipment, experience, or natural ferocity. It is intended to be fought alone or in small numbers. Elite creatures have Defenses between 5-7. *Use Elite creatures in The Intro Battle and as squad leaders in the Big Brawl.*

Bosses

Bosses lead other creatures, and are the strongest variant of their type the heroes are likely to encounter. Bosses are able to fight an entire band of heroes while alone. Bosses have Defenses of 10+ in addition to other means of mitigating damage. See *Monsters & Other Adversaries* for more details. *Use a Boss in the Final Battle.*

Choosing the Difficulty

If you're experimenting with various combinations of cards, you'll note if a Stat of 5 is **Good**, there are many, *many* combinations capable of killing even *giants* with one shot - a Deep Dwarf Swordmage, for example, rolls (at least) 13 dice for Melee, which has an 87% chance of dispatching a (Squad) giant with one swing.

As with Environmental Challenges, don't *penalize* heroes who are awesome at dealing out death and destruction! When their players picked those cards, they did so intentionally. They were sending the GM a message, and that message was, *"I want to be a badass."* Let them! Don't underestimate how much fun players have decimating bad guys. Really!

But what if you have more bad*asses* than bad *guys*? As stated earlier, always remember to always create more content than you need. That includes battles.

Running Adventures

Character Generation

Alternate Character Generation

The method of Character Generation presented in the **Players' Guide** is just *one* way to use the cards. Feel free to experiment!

- **Totally Random:** draw 1 card each from Avatars, Professions, and Legends, and what you get is what you get. Who says a half-dragon gnomish assassin is ridiculous? *Someone who's about to DIE, that's who.*

- **More Professions:** Add another Profession to make a character more powerful. Or forego a Legend card for a second Profession. This means Relations aren't in play, but your gaming group may be fine role-playing without Relations anyway.

- **More Legends:** Multiple Legends can make for wildly colorful characters, but the question is, what to do with all of the Relations? Just keep what works and toss the ones out that don't.

- **No Legends:** With large groups of players (6+), you can forgo Legends altogether to reduce the power level of each hero and ensure everyone has an opportunity to shine. While you lose Relations when you do this, chances are not a lot of in-depth role-playing was going to happen anyway.

- **Building what you want:** Let players pick and choose the combinations that are most attractive to them. Pro: players have control over what they play. Con: power-gamers will attempt to "optimize" their characters, which can take a lot of time away from actually *playing* - the focus will become picking the most advantageous card combo.

Immediately After Cards are Picked

There are a few things you, as a GM, should take note of as soon as the players pick their cards.

- **Who has Area Attacks?** There are plenty of Area Attacks in the deck, but it's still possible for any given group of characters to end up with only 1-2 Area Attacks between them. Consider limiting the number of *Squads* in your battles to compensate - otherwise your big battle could turn into a big snoozefest.

- **Who has a Psychic Attack?** No one? Did you put a monster in the adventure that can only be attacked with Psychic Attacks (e.g., a Wraith)? Do you have a Plan B? This could be as simple as placing a magic sword in the adventure that attacks WP instead of DP.

- **Who has Healing Ability?** Some characters can heal themselves, others can heal the whole party. Make a note of them because that will give you an idea of the group's ability to take punishment and keeping going without Rest.

- **Who looks like a Powerhouse - and who looks like a Pushover?** Typically in any group of player characters there will be one who is godlike in combat. Similarly, there will be one or two characters that are sitting ducks when violence breaks out. Make a note of these characters - the "Running Combat" section has suggestions for how to handle them.

As a guideline, you want to figure out how to give every Player Character a chance to use most (if not all) of their Heroic Powers before the game is over. Consider adjusting events here and there to ensure this happens. Nothing thrills players quite like having their choices (from Character Creation) validated: "I just *knew* picking Tinker would come in handy!"

GM Judgement Calls

When to Call for Feats

As a GM, you have control over when the dice are rolled. Don't ask for a player character to perform a Feat if the action in question isn't deemed *Important*. It slows the game down. If the action in question is cool and the character's Stat is a 5 or better, describe how awesome it turned out and move on. If their Stat is less than that, describe how it didn't work out. Reserve dice for when the outcome is truly *meaningful*.

This goes for combat too, by the way. Many small skirmishes can be narrated if the outcome is a foregone conclusion. Reserve your time for pivotal fights.

Interpreting Cards

The cards generate numerous unforeseen interactions between Powers. For example, say you have a player who drew the **Spy** Profession and *Elder Race* Legend cards. The Spy's "Remarkable Ruse" Power allows her to randomly select a second Profession from 3 random cards as a so-called cover identity and have limited access to its abilities. Elder Race's "Elder Experience" Power allows her to use another Heroic Power and double its effects. So what if she uses Elder Experience to trigger Remarkable Ruse? Does she receive 2 cover Professions? Or does she get to draw 6 cards when picking her cover?

As the GM, you are the final word regarding how powers work together. Try to be consistent within the context of the adventure, but don't worry about it too much. After all, Swift Saga is for one-shot games. Take comfort in the fact that if you make a bad decision, you won't have to live with it for very long.

> GM: *"Edwina, the basilisk's gaze has frozen you in place - you're in danger of being crystallized! Arthur and Nelunus, you see Edwina seize up in a shroud of light! The remaining basilisks turn on you."*

> Chuck & Barry: *"Crap!"*

> Ann: *"Wait! What about my arm?"*

> GM: *"What?"*

> Ann: *"Well, I'm Half-Clockwork, right? The picture shows a clockwork arm. Is it frozen too, or can it move?"*

> GM (Wants to see where this is going): *"Why...yes...it can!"*

> Ann: *"As the basilisk turns on them, I grab it by its tail!"*

At this point, the GM could argue that being **Frozen** in place, even with a moving arm, would make this impossible - but it's sounding pretty cool, isn't it? In addition, the fact that Ann is coming up with creative solutions to difficult situations shows a level of engagement in the story that a GM wants to encourage.

> GM: *"Okay, that's an Unarmed attack. Normally you would suffer a -2 penalty, but it's counted you out, so it's a Surprise Attack instead."*

> Ann: *"I'm spending a Willpower to Overcome Adversity."*

> GM: *"So you're rolling 2 dice, plus 3 Successes."*

> Ann: *"Boom! I get all 5."*

GM: "Nelunus, Arthur - you see Edwina's clockwork arm clutch her basilisk's tail and yank it backward. Something in its spine cracks loudly and it ceases moving. The rest of Edwina is motionless, still sheathed in sickly light."

Barry: "Don't screw with the wind-up halfling!"

Travel & Exploration

Unless there are obstacles or decisions to be made, overland travel *just happens* - narrate it. Use the opportunity to evoke a mood for the adventure with description. The heroes travel, in a phrase attributed to J. Michael Straczynski, "at the speed of plot." It takes as many days as you need it to take, keeping in mind each day is another opportunity for players to refresh their Heroic Powers. Do you want the heroes to come to each decision point fully refreshed and ready for action? Or do you want them to carefully measure their response to each scene?

Avoid random situations and battles that don't propel the adventure in some way: by advancing the narrative, creating an opportunity for role-playing, or keeping the players engaged. If a planned encounter with 30 Giant Wolves in the middle of the wilderness suddenly *seems* pointless, *it probably is*. If your players all created warlike heroes, however, they may welcome it as an opportunity to use their cool abilities. It is up to you to take stock of your players and what motivates them.

Perception

Searching is an Perception Feat (INT). If you've planted a *critical* clue or useful information in a scene, the Player Characters should *just find it* if they make the effort. You can call for a Feat to obfuscate the fact you were going to give the information anyway, of course.

So what is Perception for, then? It's used when the outcome can truly have an impact on what happens next - spotting an ambush, noticing a trap, finding an easier path up a mountainside, etc. In each case the story would proceed whether or not the Player Characters did well on the Feat. Take the last example, however - if the only way for the adventure to continue is for someone to find the path up the mountain, you will need to contrive a way for this to happen regardless of luck with dice.

Outcome	GM Might Respond
Failed (0 Successes)	"Look, a butterfly!"
Mortal (1-2 Successes)	"Something isn't right here..."
Noteworthy (3 Successes)	"There is an ambush ahead!"
Legendary (5+ Successes)	"There are 3 ninjas in the branches ahead of you, and one of them has a sprained ankle."

Concerning Gear

Going to town to buy equipment is such an integral part of fantasy role-playing, it will come up despite Swift Saga's attempts to downplay it. At the very least player characters will want to buy drinks when they come to an inn.

Assume the heroes have suitable equipment for their chosen profession (and enough spare coins of the realm to enjoy a few creature comforts). The Profession cards suggest what this might be, but players are free to suggest changes based on preference, Power descriptions, or even illustrations. For example, the female Forest Elf's *Running Shot* power would suggest ranged weaponry, but what if she is paired with the Wizard Profession? If she asks, let her have a bow! She doesn't need to go buy it, because it makes sense that a Forest Elf would have a bow, even as a Wizard.

What if a character has Powers that allow him to change Professions midgame, such as the male High Elf? To the degree that it doesn't destroy continuity, allow him to simply have the appropriate tools to perform his new job, or be able to "make do" until arriving at the next town, suffering a small penalty as a result. As you may have noticed while reading the cards, equipment doesn't really matter that much in Swift Saga.

Fair enough, but what if the player characters want to buy lumber and tools to build a siege tower in order to breach the dark lord's fortress? First of all, if this is the master plan your players have settled on, you probably have other things to worry about. Second, say *yes*. Move the story forward. They found the supplies they need, now they need to build it. Ask for some Feats. *Surely you didn't mean for the whole adventure to take place with the heroes standing outside the dark lord's fortress, did you?*

Running Combat

There are three main goals to keep in mind when running fights in Swift Saga.

- *Keep things moving* - if a player is stuck for ideas or otherwise confused, skip him or her temporarily and go to the next person. If they're still confused when you come back, ask a more experienced player to help them with ideas, or suggest something straightforward, like "You have a bow, why don't you shoot *that* guy?"

- The battle should change drastically - for better or worse - every 3 Turns or so.

- Combat shouldn't interrupt the flow of the game and role-playing shouldn't stop.

Of course it won't ALL be role-playing, as you see here. There are jokes and lots of rules-jargon - but the GM keeps things focused on the characters by using their in-game names and describing things from their point of view. If you do that, the players will usually respond in kind!

GM: "You're traveling down the forest road when your usual bickering is interrupted by battlecries - small green creatures are rushing you from either side of the road: goblins!"

Ann: "How many?"

GM: "Hard to count, exactly, but more than 30 of them. Lots more."

(The GM knows there are 2 squads, or 60 goblins total, but he wants to maintain the fog of war.)

Chuck: (Places a token on his Druid card) "Arthur will transform into a bear and roar in response. I'm trying to scare some of them off."

GM: (Thinking) "Let me see what everyone else is going to do."

Barry: "Do I have time to get an Eldritch Blast off before they get to us?"

GM: "Sure."

Ann: "I'm going to fire my bow too."

GM: "Let me know if you get 2 Successes or a Scratch."

(Barry & Ann easily score 2 Successes–the DP of a squad goblin, so the GM notes on a scratch pad that one of the two squads has been reduced by 2. Now the GM circles back to Chuck. Chuck doesn't have a Power that does what he's trying to do, but the idea that a bear could spark fear in the goblins is plausible - and it plays to Arthur's strengths. Chuck's cards don't lend themselves to hacking & slashing.)

GM: "Arthur is attempting to intimidate the goblins, which is a Charisma Feat. I'll give you a +2 bonus since you're a bear."

Chuck: "That gives me 9 dice. How many successes do I need?"

GM: "You need at least 3 Successes for something to happen, but the more you get the better."

Chuck: "Okay, I'll spend 1 Willpower to Overcome Adversity." (Rolls Dice) "Dang, just 4!"

GM: "Actually, that's pretty good - one of the Squads suffers Fear."

Chuck, Barry, & Ann: "Woo-hoo!"

GM: "Okay, the other squad of goblins is made of sterner stuff. They rush into your Area, brandishing axes and serrated short swords - they attack..." (GM rolls 2 dice) "...and score a Scratch."

Chuck: "So how does that work again?"

Ann: "Squads always do Area Attacks, so we all lose 1 DP from the Scratch. Actually, I don't, just you guys. I'm armor-plated." (Points at her Half-Clockwork card.)

Chuck: "Smarty-pants."

Ann: "You know it!"

GM: "Right, your DP reduced by 1 except for Edwina. Edwina, you think there are nearly 30 of them, not counting the demoralized ones."

(The GM decides that the two goblins that were slain belong to the squad that's still engaged, so their actual number is 28.)

Chuck: "By the gods! It'll be a death by a thousand cuts!"

Barry: (To Chuck) "Pull yourself together, Arthur! You're a Wolfan!" (To GM) "I switch to unarmed combat, using Dragon Fist. I can attack unarmed without penalty, and my attacks are Penetrating, too!"

GM: "Nice."

Barry: "And Nelunus has a Strength of 7! I roll 3 Successes. Boom!"

GM: "You guys see Nelunus explode a goblin's skull with his fist."

Ann: "Ew! Edwina will Move out of the Melee and fire her bow. Rolling 8 dice…I get 4 Successes."

GM: "Don't forget to spend 1 DP when you Move out of an occupied Area. You plant an arrow in a goblin's heart."

Chuck: "I suppose I'll have to get my claws dirty! I only have a Strength of 5 though, even as a bear." (Rolls dice) "I got one!"

GM: "Arthur ravages a hapless goblin!"

(The GM reconsiders the encounter in light of the player characters' abilities. They don't have a lot of Area attacks, so they hoard them. The players know they can go several Turns without the goblins posing a real threat to them, too. This is a recipe for a boring battle…which will last 8 Turns or more at this rate. The GM decides to have the goblin chieftain "emerge" from the squad and up the ante a bit - this chieftain is just an Elite.)

GM: "The goblins respond with axe and sword…" (rolls dice, adding an extra die for Mob Brutality) "…but they fail to even Scratch you. 'Death to the enemies of Grar!' you hear - then an oversized goblin with a double-headed axe strides forth to cleave Nelunus!" (Rolls dice) "Nelunus, you're Scratched."

Barry: "What the-? I'm at a DP of 4 now."

Ann: "Who is this guy? Do I know anything about him?"

GM: (Decides this is something a Ranger would know.) "Edwina, it looks like a goblin chieftain to you!"

Ann: "Yikes, I'm going to target him - rolling…3 Successes."

GM: "Did you Scratch?"

Ann: "…no."

GM: "He knocks your arrow aside with his spinning axe!"

Chuck: "I'll attack him! I get a Scratch."

GM: "You score a bloody gash across one of his arms, but he fights on!"

Barry: "Iron Fist. I roll 3 Successes, and a Scratch."

GM (Noting that the 3 Successes doesn't beat a DP of 4, and that the Penetrating Scratch is applied afterward) "You land a fist in his abdomen and you hear crunching bones. He screams at you in defiance!"

(The GM notes that all 3 players are excited and engaged by the fight now, each eager to slay the chieftain.)

GM: "The goblin squad, eager not to disappoint their chieftain, fights on! They do score another Scratch."

Barry: "That puts me at 3 DP."

Chuck: "I'm Wounded!" (Flips over his Lord in Exile card.)

Ann: "I'm still okay, but we can't do this forever!"

GM: "The chieftain launches into Nelunus with his double-headed axe, and scores 4 Successes!"

Barry: "Oh no he doesn't - Eldritch Shield! ...And I'll spend 2 Willpower to keep it from being spent."

GM: "Nice - Nelunus raises his hand and a field of crackling energy deflects the chieftain's axe!"

Barry: "I'm over this! We have a kingdom to save!" (Places a token on Dragon Fist.) "Dragon Fist, baby! I'm going to try to get as many of these little fiends as I can. Rolling 8 dice…4 Successes and a Scratch."

GM: "You utterly disintegrate the chieftain with your strike, and the shockwave obliterates the other goblins in your Area, as well as some of the goblins cowering in the forest. Several trees are knocked over as well! Any survivors are running for their lives."

Ann: (To Barry) "Next time, why don't you LEAD with that?"

Upping the Ante in Combat

As GM, it's your prerogative to change the adjust the dynamics of a battle if you think it's going nowhere fast or your players aren't having fun. Here are some things you can try to speed the story up, especially if your players are reluctant to use Heroic Powers to finish it.

- **Attacking Terrain.** Monsters of great size (Giant+) and strength can attack the terrain itself, forgoing an attempt to harm the player characters directly to make things harder for them in other ways. It's also a useful technique to make an encounter feel truly epic by reminding the players just how big a creature is. Attacking Terrain is a STR Feat. What is the creature's goal? If it's to gain a brief advantage (e.g., creating a patch of Hazardous Terrain), then a Noteworthy outcome is sufficient. If the creature is trying to redefine the battlefield (e.g., cut off escape routes), then a Legendary outcome is needed. In any event, heroes in the Area suffer Knockback if the attempt is successful.

- **Fatigue.** After a few rounds, announce that everyone (allies and enemies) has become fatigued and loses a DP. Continue doing this each round, escalating the number of DP lost. This will tend to open even the strongest monsters up to attack, and provoke the players to take drastic action.

- **Battlefield Promotions.** Upgrade creatures to Elites or Bosses on the fly to keep the pressure up.

- **Run Away!** The enemies, sensing the battle isn't going anywhere, withdraw to fight another day. Maybe they show up later in the adventure, maybe not. Even if the heroes decide to give chase, at least the fight has become dynamic again.

Handling Powerhouses

The cards can generate some tremendously powerful fighters. A *Half-Giant Warrior Demigod* would roll 11 dice in Melee, plus 4 Successes, targeting up to 3 enemies with a single swing! The player has a pretty good chance of rolling 10 Successes when her character attacks. *Every time.*

As it should be! I mean, c'mon! She's a Half-Giant, Half-God Warrior. Queue up the Squad of Dragons! You would go see that movie. You would read that book!

Wait! It's *ALSO* possible, given how the cards work, that *no one else* in this hypothetical Half-Giant Warrior Demigod's party is even *remotely* as dangerous as she is. The rest of the heroes might be Wizards, Bards, and Rogues. *Problem-solvers*, in other words. So how do you scale up an encounter to keep things interesting for your Powerhouse without slaughtering everyone else?

It turns out the things you do to keep things interesting for the Powerhouse are the same things you do to keep combat interesting, period.

- **Surprise Ambushes.** Surprising the Powerhouse (if possible) is a good way to start a battle. She's probably leading the way, right? It makes sense, if precautions haven't been taken, that any hidden threats will attack her first. While it probably won't kill her, it will definitely keep her engaged even if the rest of the encounter is relatively lightweight.

- **Using the Space.** Chasms, precipices, and narrow bridges restrict her choices - while allowing Ranged attackers to pelt her from a safe distance.

- **Guarding the Helpless.** An escort quest! Have the Powerhouse take a break by putting her in a situation where she has to Defend Others against a dire threat - now the other heroes have to step up their game.

- **Everyone wants a Piece of 'Em.** The Powerhouse's reputation precedes her, especially as the adventure plays out. The Villain has identified her as the biggest threat and gives orders accordingly. The minion who eliminates the Powerhouse will be rewarded handsomely...

- **She IS the Brute Squad.** If the scenario supports it, have the group split up, leaving the Powerhouse to single-handedly fight swarms of enemies while the rest of the party goes to solve some other kind of problem. Cut back and forth for dramatic effect.

- **Psychic Attacks.** While you can generate a well-rounded Powerhouse with the cards, it's likely that a physical Powerhouse will still be vulnerable to Psychic Attacks. Squads of enemies with "soul-draining" powers can easily turn the usual dynamic on its head. The hypothetical Half-Giant Demigod Warrior has a WP of 3. It would be a *shame* if she were Charmed or Dominated…!

Handling Pushovers

Powerhouses aren't the only thing you have to worry about as a GM. What do you do if a hero is not physical in any way? A *High Elf Wizard Pyromancer* is a great combination, but it has a DP of 2. He or she is the proverbial Glass Cannon. There are mitigating factors, of course - the male High Elf can switch out Professions, and the female High Elf (in this instance) would be nearly untouchable if she chose to sit out a battle (c.v., Vision of the Sublime) - but their routine effectiveness in battle is considerably limited. How can you subtly aid Pushovers?

- **Opening up the Space.** Generally speaking, wide-open battlegrounds favor weaker characters by always giving them somewhere to run away to (assuming there are no Ranged attackers).

- **Psychic Enemies.** As mentioned in "Handling Powerhouses" - your Pushover is probably a Psychic Powerhouse. The combination listed above would have a WP of 10, relatively undeterred by Wraiths or other psionic enemies that give Warrior-types pause.

- **Rallying the Troops.** There are other things going on in the battle that require the attention of the Pushover. He's elsewhere, disarming a trap or convincing the King to send reinforcements. Not every battle is won by force of arms alone!

Multiple Attacks

There are a number of cards that will give a hero multiple Attacks per Action, and certain combinations of cards could get pretty absurd pretty quickly.

To illustrate this, take the female Ophidian (from Caravan of Dreams), Mercenary, and Half-Clockwork combination. The Ophidian has 4 arms and as such is allowed to make 2 non-Psychic Attacks per Action. The Mercenary is *Ruthlessly Efficient* and can make 2 Melee or Ranged Attacks per Action. This means this character makes 4 Attacks every Turn. But wait! She is also Half-Clockwork, with the Heroic Power *Overclocking*. This allows her to Instantly

take physical Actions equal to her STR (which is 6). **The end result of this would be 24 Attacks in one Turn.** Granted, she couldn't do that *every* Turn, but still. Even 4 Attacks per Turn is absurd.

The problem isn't that it breaks the game (Swift Saga is *about* breaking Swift Saga), the problem is everyone sitting around the table while one player rolls dice for 5 minutes just to reach the inevitable conclusion that everything is dead, dead, dead. As GM, you have some options. You want the player in question to have fun, but you want everyone else to have fun too. Walk the line as follows:

- **If the multiple attacks are all being landed on one hapless creature,** let the player make one attack roll and add 2 Successes for every additional attack *they could have made*. The end result will be about the same, but you've just saved a lot of rolling.

- **If the multiple attacks are being spread out against all creatures in an Area,** convert it into one Area Attack, +1 die for each additional attack she would have made, i.e., instead of rolling 6 dice 24 times, she rolls 30 dice *once* versus all creatures in the Area.

Narrative Combat

Sometimes combat doesn't require a lot of detail, either because the end result is a foregone conclusion - or the fight itself is part of a larger scene involving Social or Environmental challenges. Lone guards and sharks in the water are examples of fights that could be handled in a narrative fashion.

For narrative combat, describe the threat, and have the player character describe her intent and roll the most appropriate Stat. Add or remove dice for good ideas, relevant Traits, etc. If she scores more than 3 Successes she dispatches the threat; if she fails to do so, she loses 1-2 DP and the battle continues.

Stunts in Combat

Regarding the setting of battles, some players get a thrill out of having their characters flipping around, swinging from chandeliers, etc. The answer in most cases should be "Yes!" with caveats. These stunts are not to be discouraged, but unless they provide a tangible advantage they're just *description*. If a hero is swinging from a rope into a melee, what is he attempting to accomplish? Surprise? Ask the intent first, and make sure it doesn't duplicate another Action already addressed by the rules.

If the intent is to gain a one-time advantage such as Surprise, a Noteworthy Feat is all that is needed. A lasting advantage will require a Legendary Feat. If the player fails to garner enough Successes, the stunt becomes description, nothing more. If the player fails to roll any Successes *at all* then deduct 1 DP for being reckless. If a Stunt isn't dangerous, it isn't a Stunt.

How to get Players to use Heroic Powers

Resource management is core to how Swift Saga works. Yet some players have a hard time using Heroic Powers out of fear they'll use them at the wrong time. They're absolutely *certain* a major encounter is coming up, and there they are stuck without their best Powers! Here are a couple of techniques to help.

- **Telegraph how long the adventure will be, in the game world.** For example, as the heroes set off for the Dark Lord's realm, indicate it will take 3 days to get there. Right away, the players know they will have multiple opportunities to use and refresh their Heroic Powers.

- **The optional "Karma Bonus" Rule.** Give player characters a bonus to all Actions equal to one die for every Heroic Power they've expended - a bonus that goes away as those Powers are recharged. If a player character knows she'll at least have this bonus to fall back on, she'll be a lot less reluctant to take a chance on using Heroic Powers.

- **Make the adventure harder!** If the player characters aren't using their Heroic Powers, you are probably going too easy on them.

Sudden Death (a/k/a Hardcore Mode)

Don't be afraid to let a hero die when circumstances dictate it. Just have the unfortunate player deal out another character quickly (purely random!), and fit them in as soon as you can. The new hero isn't new at all, since their Legend card's Relations will ensure his two neighbors at the table already know him. The easiest thing to do is to have the replacement character be on the same adventure the other characters are on - he was just given bad information and was trying to "go it alone". He was already thinking about turning back when his old friends showed up…!

It's Dangerous to Go Alone, Take This

"Leveling Up" refers to the tradition of the hero becoming more powerful as a result of vanquishing enemies and acquiring treasure. Swift Saga games usually aren't long enough for leveling, which is why it's been left out of the core system. But *Treasure!* Treasure we can fit in, and have it serve as an in-game level up.

You can invent magical Treasures for your adventures using index cards and your imagination. Treasures follow a similar pattern to other Swift Saga cards, having no more than a couple of Powers and possibly a Stat Bonus. *Treasures can even be flipped over when Wounded.*

Here are a few examples of items you can drop into an adventure, particularly if the heroes are having a hard time of it. Either have an ally bestow the Treasure, have the heroes discover it in a monster's lair, or have them seek it out as preparation for a final quest/battle.

Cape of Renown (+1 CHA)

- **Your Attention, Please (Passive Magic)** Your first CHA feat of any social encounter is Epic.

- **I'm Here to Help (Heroic Magic)** This is a Psychic Magic Area Attack versus all creatures who can see you - those who are Hit are Charmed.

Ring of Eldritch Power (+1 INT)

- **Eldritch Mastery (Passive Magic)** Add 1 Success to every Magic Power.

- **Eldritch Rejuvenation (Heroic Magic)** Recharge a Heroic Magic Power of your own or that of an ally's.

Mercurial Boots (+1 AGI)

- **Hasty (Passive Magic)** All AGI Feats pertaining to Running and swiftness are Epic.

- **Blur of Speed (Heroic Magic)** *Instantly* receive a number of bonus physical Actions equal to AGI.

Vorpal Sword (+1 STR)

- **Unimaginably Sharp (Passive Magic)** All attacks from this weapon are Twice Penetrating - that is, *a Scratch reduces the target's DP by 4 points!*

- **Snicker-Snack! (Heroic Magic)** *Instantly* use the sword to Wound a creature, regardless of its defenses (DP or WP).