

Stakes that Rock...

...Put things that are meaningful up for change

Really, truly awesome stakes change both characters at least a little, even if they only would make the person who won them into the guy who did that thing. Beating up your mugger isn't generally astonishing stakes. Throwing your would-be mugger out onto the street, where his street buddies can see, and then pasting him, might be.

...Contain activity

There's always a temptation to counter someone's stakes with "No, you don't". Resist it; clarify how the other person is going to try and accomplish what they want, and what either you as a player or your character would come to want because of the attempt, and go for that if nothing else comes to mind.

...Should always move the story forwards

Both success and failure must move the story forward. Failure cannot be the end of the line, but should complicate things and push the story in another direction. Good stakes should provide an interesting outcome, both if they succeed or fail. The stakes should never have an optimum outcome from the interest of the story's point of view.

...Can give lasting resolution

Your stakes can settle something completely. It's important to be clear. If the Goodfella uses "you won't ever darken my door again" as his stakes, make sure you're sure on what he means – if he means that your character won't ever go by his place again, then that's what happens if he wins.

...Can be "you go too far"

You can offer stakes that have your opponent going further than they wanted. In a giant screaming match at the kitchen table, if one side set the (rather ugly) stakes "I slap you into shutting up for the night", and the response came "You hit me so hard that I miscarry." – well. Nasty, it may be, but we're on.

...Can replace scenes that would be impossible or uncomfortable to play through

"I wear you down in bed, and get you to promise that you'll leave your wife" vs. "I begin crying in the middle of sex, can't complete the act, and tell you that I'm going home and confessing everything." isn't a playable scene, but it's one hell of a set of stakes.

...Are strongly tied to the game

Stakes that happen in a void are boring. Joe and Victor are the characters. If Joe wins, Victor defects to the USA. If Victor wins, Joe defects to the USSR. Without a body of information about Joe and Victor, it's empty. Now replace Joe with Captain America and Victor with Stalin.

...Are agreed on

Not just clearly communicated, but actively agreed to. As in, all players involved in the conflict find the possible outcomes interesting.

...Can become compromises instead

Sometimes at the end of a battle you haven't won and you haven't lost. If that happens then you need to be able to take those original stakes and bring them together into something cool. Compromises can turn a simple win/lose situation on its head, and that's a good thing. Part of the compromise could be to extend the conflict with both sides losing a little ground as long as it is engaging (everyone's invested).

...Bring attention to something you care about

If you say, "I'm making **this** a conflict!" you're saying, "I'm making you pay attention to this thing over here!" You're saying, "I care about this, and I want you to challenge me." If you care about something, frame the stakes of your conflicts around it.

...Show that you know another player well

If you choose stakes that make another person sit bolt upright and grab for dice then you have just shown them that you get them. You understand what they find interesting (perhaps better than they do) and you find it interesting too. That's some powerful social mojo there.

...Can be used to extend something from a passing narration into a conflict

If you set up a conflict, what you stake can't be won or lost until the conflict is resolved. This means someone else can't simply state it as color. Once it's at stake, you have to earn the right to declare it. You want something to be earned? Stake it.

...Can be orthogonal to in-game events

Instead of success/fail stakes, these are "this is what it is about." If stakes are "it's about your dignity", can you still try to stab someone in the face to preserve it? If the answer is yes, that's what I mean.

...Are either strategic or not

Sometimes it's fun to keep an eye on what comes next and set stakes up in such a way that they will eventually lead to the big price you're (also) after. Sometimes it's fun to close in on the here and now and not care about what's next, until you get there. It's much harder to get people fired up, when one is playing the long con while the other wants matters settled right here, right now.

...Can just be the fuzzy end line of a cool conflict

Getting there is half the fun, as they say. The stakes of a conflict orient the two sides against each other in a specific way. If you have a fight where the stakes are death of the opposition, that's one thing, but if the stakes are preventing an enemy from crossing a bridge (which has the magical McGuffin on the other side) then that informs the style of the conflict in a big way.

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