



DRAGONLAIRD GAMING

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Bonus Content: The Shield

Sometimes I'll complete an article for my Gaming the Movies column but later come up with additional information or have material that wouldn't fit in the original column. For the Shield, a column published in Knights of the Dinner Table issue 154, I collected a lot more information that you might find useful in setting up a Shield game.

I started watching the Shield on DVD only about a month ago but got pretty captivated by its characters, style, and substance. It seemed like a great way to change-up my column and start looking at television series in addition to movies.

In writing the column, I amassed quite a bit of information that would be helpful but was beyond the core points of the column. It also wouldn't fit in the space allotted for the column. I saw that using the Cortex Engine system would be a good fit for the rules and I wanted to stat up some of the characters from the show. A good full description of the Barn would be very helpful to the game master. Basically, in short of publishing a licensed product (The Shield RPG), I wanted to assemble some of the information that you'd hope to find there.

- Building a Shield Adventure

As we discussed in the published column, any RPG adventure is a mixture of "Casework" and "Soap Opera". Basically, how much game time is being consumed by PCs doing their jobs and how much is used for inter-character conflicts and extra-curricular activities. The Shield has a fairly even mixture of the two elements. What follows are some more notes on each. Much of this information is common to police TV dramas but it forms a good list of elements to build a Shield adventure with. You need to understand the police procedure so you can be prepared to run the game.

- CASEWORK
 - Case Outline

The following is the general skeleton for a case. You need to know the answers and clues for each stage and be prepared to improvise when the players think of other avenues to pursue.

1. Crime is planned – Unless it is a crime of passion, one or more people planned it or knew it was being planned.

2. Crime occurs – Did it go according to plan or did something mess it up? Were there witnesses? Were they threatened or harmed? What crime was actually committed? Did they intend to rob some place and end up killing someone?

3. Crime is reported – It might be seconds or hours before the police are notified that the crime occurred. It might be the victim calling 911 or even coming to the precinct house. A neighbor or witness might call in ‘gunshots’ or something equally vague. On the rare occasion, an officer will see a crime in progress.

4. Officers respond to crime scene and secure the area, preserve evidence. – Response time averages about 3 minutes in urban areas unless there is a high amount of calls at that time. What happens when they arrive can continue the case if someone shoots at them or tries to run away. They need to assess the scene and call in the correct level of additional resources, if any are necessary. Key evidence is bagged (like a discarded weapon) This might be when the Detectives get notified.

5. Visit the Crime Scene – The Detectives arrive to assess the scene, hear the report of the officer on the scene, talk to witnesses, look for physical evidence, ensure that the other professionals are called or have what they need to do their jobs (Social Services for guardian-less children or rape victims, EMTs for wounded, Morgue for dead, ballistics).

6. Follow leads – Likely avenues of pursuit include: following the physical evidence by trying to match fingerprints, descriptions, pictures, or DNA to police records; interviewing the victim, their family, their friends, witnesses and potential witnesses; examine or piece together clues provided by the other professionals (medical examiner report, ballistics report, etc.);

7. Use the Team – Dispatch department members/assets to run down the details: victim’s work history or criminal record; uniformed officers to find a stolen car, round someone up, basic legwork.

8. Utilize Non-Police Assets – For example, if the crime seems gang-related, visit a gang informant.

9. Piece It All Together – Through all of this process, the players will be trying to piece together the clues, to try to discern the true story behind what happened, who did what, why they did it, when they did it. If they get some solid, credible leads, they can petition a judge for a Warrant to do a wire-tap, search a suspect’s home/car/workplace

10. Question Suspects – As things seem to get more clear, key suspects or witnesses can be brought into the station house for questioning. Just the fact that the police are bringing them in sends a signal to their friends, business associates, fellow gang members. Once in the interrogation rooms, they are video-taped and

questioned for a few hours until they are charged or released. Detectives try to get more answers out of them: who is lying? why did they do this or that? what was the actual timeline and what alibis hold up or don't?

11. Further Developments – As a case drags on, sometimes new evidence comes to light. Lengthy scientific processes or backlogged police procedures might cough up a clue like a bullet-gun match, fingerprint match, or DNA match.

12. Solution – Often in *The Shield*, the Detectives get a suspect to confess either through a blurted error, playing to their pride or their particular psychology. Bad Cops might threaten or beat a confession out of someone, but risk having it thrown out of court if the suspect files a complaint. If the solution isn't in the interrogation room, it lies in getting the right person to agree to testify, or by finally locating a critical piece of evidence. As soon as they have a case, they arrest the suspect and turn him over to the system. In *The Shield*, that's the end of the process. An arrest is victory.

- Techniques and Situations

For meeting the challenges of police work, there is the grey area of technique. Police academies teach certain things and other aspects are learned on the job or by seeing what works or doesn't on the streets. For each challenge, there are choices to be made and often these choices drive much of the conflict in the series. One officer known for intellectual questioning might be stymied by a gang thug where a more brutal cop might scare something out of him. A little police brutality can also stop an investigation cold by making enemies where there didn't need to be any.

Investigative Techniques

1. Brutal/Physical

– In the land of tough streets and tough cops, people don't play nice with each other. Suspects are pushed into walls, even when they don't resist arrest but just to get a point made. Thug cops groom a street reputation of being willing to hurt people and step outside the law. They bet that the reputation will do more good than the occasional civil complaint. In an investigation, they might try to beat or threaten witnesses and suspects to give up information or even to find things out (get the word on the street) by going places cops can't go.

2. Indirect/cerebral

– These Detectives try to understand the psychology of the perpetrator and then work back to the suspects or physical evidence to substantiate their profiles. Effective when pursuing smart criminals and psychopaths they

might 'over-think' things when crimes are really as simple as they seem. Fortunately for players in *The Shield*, there aren't many simple cases.

3. Direct/gumshoe

– Assembling evidence to construct a conclusion, these detectives aren't expecting a confession although they take witness and suspect testimony into account as pieces of the larger puzzle. They rely on trails of evidence, knowing who was where when, who had motive for the crime, and who had opportunity. They are most susceptible to red herrings where evidence is concerned.

Confrontations

4. Tactical Challenges

– When it is time to catch a suspect or save a hostage, to search a location for evidence, direct action is called for. The challenge becomes one of tactics. How many officers are available? Is there time to get the right equipment (heavy rams to knock down doors, bulletproof vests, a tow truck to pull a steel cage door off the house, etc.)? What is the location like, highly populated or isolated? What type of urban building is involved: apartment, ownhouse, warehouse, store, nightclub, park, school, hospital, professional offices, church, government offices? Are there dogs or lookouts? Where are all the exits? Are there choke points that have to be navigated? Is the inside a known layout or a delapidated maze? What are the weaknesses that can be exploited? Do the lookouts prefer to watch the girls at the party than watch for cops coming up the stairs?

5. Neighborhoods

– Arresting a gang member in the middle of his home turf might require an overwhelming show of force or the officers might get overwhelmed or hurt. Arresting someone in church or in a restaurant might anger other members of their community. Acts of brutality in the wrong place can incite riots and acts of revenge.

Interrogation Techniques

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investigation, they might try to beat or threaten answers out of suspects. They may threaten to put the word on the street that the suspect talked even when he didn't, making him seem like a rat. They can play good cop, bad cop, crazy cop.

7. Indirect/cerebral

– Trying to out-think the criminal mind can be effective for a studied and experienced detective. Knowing the suspects strengths and weaknesses, she can play off them to manipulate the suspects understanding of the situation or their emotions. In questioning, they try to get the suspect to trip up and admit something or so proud/angry/emotional that they feel compelled to confess. They may present evidence to shock or disturb the suspect, claim evidence exists which doesn't, hide the fact that evidence exists or that others are being questioned in the building. Also, for suspects with any conscience, there is an underlying need to confess their guilt, though how strong it is varies widely.

How you resolve interrogations depends on the comfort level of your group with role-playing in character. Your game can rely on stats and skills to resolve opposed challenges with NPC stats and skills, dressed up in the description of the interactions. The key with the 'roll-playing' approach is to understand how using different techniques will change the case. Brutality can have blowback but other methods may make friends or enemies as well.

If your players want to role-play it out, encourage it by having smart techniques and good effort yield results. Not everything should be a push-over if you have an 'actor' in your group, but RPGs are designed to reward fun and positive effort. If players are invested enough to act out scenes in character, support that, perhaps with a bonus to skill checks if you want that as the actual arbiter of results. Unless the person being questioned is trying to lie or is a key character, most interactions can be done with a minimum of rolling. (You should be consistent otherwise rolls only come up when people are lying which tips players off). If players use intuition or other soft perceptions, give them a shot at thinking someone is lying or telling the truth.

o Being Prepared

All these scenes, acts, and methods of investigating and fighting crime need preparation on your part. You need to know the layout and details of key locations to the investigation: crime scene, home of major suspect, streets. You need to have the criminal records of the most likely witnesses available. Understand the psychology of your major witnesses and suspects so you know how they'll act under interrogation: proud and belligerent, protesting innocence, play-acting a role, protesting ignorance, various levels of lying and what lies they will tell, emotional breakdown. How would each person crack or not?

Be prepared to wing some of this as your players will undoubtedly snag on to some line of reasoning you hadn't anticipated. Have a list of NPC names, location names, a generic criminal records available so you can smoothly provide information on people you hadn't prepared for so the players aren't tipped off.

- SOAP OPERA
 - Asset/Liability Bundles

In the published column, I discussed giving characters Assets they could leverage to represent their experience as police officers and Liabilities they'd have to deal with to encourage rich characters for role-playing. Some topics span both of these as a single trait can have significant effects both ways. Let's call these Combined Traits

RACE: Racial tensions are real in Los Angeles and can often color someone's opinion of the truth. The Farmington Precinct is still made up mostly of white, male police officers while their district has a majority Hispanic population with significant African-American presence as well. Koreans, Thai, Armenians, and more have carved their own ghettos on its streets. The police are highly aware of the tension and work hard to avoid another Rodney King-type incident which would make things much, much worse to enforce the law. People of different races within the department are often seen to have their own agendas. Outright racism and hatred lurks among officers and the populace.

CLASS: Socio-economic class has an effect on how people interact. If a police officer comes from an affluent/famous family, they may not be accepted/trusted by the more blue-collar majority of officers. They could be accused of playing favorites with other rich people, or grooming themselves for a political career. Their possessions, address, or even personal vehicle might become a target for teasing or a nastier. On the flip side they have access to levels of society that other officers would have to get warrants to penetrate. They know how to act in high society, they might have influential friends, and they could use their own money to makeup short-falls in what the department can provide (like a sum of money to use in a drug deal/sting.)

GENDER: Police forces have historically been all-male institutions. While Cagney & Lacey symbolized breaking the gender line in the police, it is still an issue in The Shield. Can a female cop perform up to the men in arresting suspects, shooting, protecting herself, and being part of the group? Will she accept their misogyny or complain about it? Does she have to do everything twice as good as the men to gain their respect and trust? Space is tight at the Barn and sharing a locker room is just one area of possible tension. Of course, being female provides benefits in terms of being able to talk to suspects or victims in a more empathic manner or be seen as less threatening. Police regulations might provide extra protections or advancement on the basis of anti-discrimination. There could also

be love or lust in the workplace if the character is willing to take on the risks of coworker involvement.

- OPPORTUNITIES FOR CORRUPTION

“We knock down the doors other cops don’t want to.” – Vic Mackey

A key element to Shield stories is the aspect of police corruption. Not all of the protagonists are white-hat heroes. As a GM, you need to provide temptations and opportunities for corruption, from something little to something huge. It might start with a cop accepting a coffee each morning until the shop owner feels like he has to give the coffee or he won’t be protected. A gift from a grateful victim could be seen as a bribe or payment.

When arresting drug dealers is involved, there are often drugs and lots of cash on the scene. The first ones on the scene have a short window where they could pocket some of the money or the drugs to sell later. They might see some object in the room: something rare, high tech, artwork, jewelry, or other things that they want and just take.

Problems come in when citizens or an unseen witness report the corrupt acts. Perhaps the officer is a little too loose with his easy gains and starts acting richer than his paygrade. Something might be so unique or traceable that it actually is traced back to him, ideally by another Detective in the precinct.

Vic Mackey had a special protection deal worked out with the drug dealer of his choice. He would crack down on competitor drug dealers and leave the protected one alone. This would give him a good arrest record and reduce gang-on-gang violence on the streets. The protected drug dealer would have to provide payments to the cop and his team. Vic saw it as win-win although not many others did.

Corruption in the Chain of Command can have major consequences: much can be hidden and people can be pressured in many quiet, hidden ways. As a reminder...

Uniformed Officers -> Sergeant -> Captain of Precinct

Detectives -> Captain of Precinct

Captain -> Assistant Chief of Police -> Chief of Police – Police Commission

- WEB RESOURCES

[LA Police Department Web Site](#)

[Root Wiki Article](#) – Includes a section on the Rampart scandal and one on the history of controversies of the LAPD.

[Structure of a City](#) – For a more detailed examination of LA City Government, this is an excellent guide.

[The Shield Wiki Article](#)

[The Shield TV Show Site](#)

[Show Coverage on tv.com](#)

[Show Entry on imdb.com](#)

[LAPD Org Chart](#)

- OTHER UNITS

The resources of the Farmington Precinct are mostly limited to uniformed officers, the anti-gang unit, a pool of detectives, and administrative/clerical staff. Other units from the city can be called upon with cause to loan resources for important operations.

- Internal Affairs

- Headed by the Inspector General, they investigate all shootings where an officer's firearm is discharged, civil complaints, and accusations of corruption.

- COUNTER-TERRORISM AND CRIMINAL INTELLIGENCE BUREAU

- Major Crimes Division

- Emergency Services Division

- Bomb Squad Unit

- Emergency Operations Section

- Hazardous Materials Unit

- DETECTIVE BUREAU

- Juvenile Division

- Detective Support Division

- Investigative Analysis Unit

- Robbery-Homicide Division

- Gang and Narcotics Division

- Vice Division

- Commercial Crimes Division

- SPECIAL OPERATIONS BUREAU

- Air Support Division

- Metropolitan Division

- Mounted Unit (Crowd Management, Crime Suppression, Public Park Enforcement)

- K-9 Unit (Help field and detective operations in searching for felony suspects,

misdemeanor subjects with a firearm, lost and missing persons, and evidence)
– SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics)

- (GEOGRAPHIC) BUREAU

(Location) Police Station

- Scientific Investigation Division
- RACR Division

– The LAPD’s first 24/7 fusion/information processing center. RACR operates as a 24/7 emergency operations center where resources, situation status of the city and developing tactical incidents are tracked.

- Trappings

Maintaining the consistent sets from the show (the Barn) will help support the flavor of the game. The precinct house is a converted Church in the southwestern/adobe style. By using it, there are lingering problems like terrible plumbing, ad-hoc cells defined by bolted chain-link fences, and shared facilities. Things feel crowded and officers have to push by the holding cages if things are crowded.

The interrogation rooms and Captain’s office are the second floor with a full balcony to overlook the main floor. The detective desks are spread out over the open main floor of the old sanctuary. Other offices like the evidence room, supplies, weapons locker, etc. are tucked around different places. Glass doors have to be buzzed by a desk sergeant to gain entry to the building.

The Strike Team has their own room with a closable lockable door to the main floor as well as a separate door to a back hallway. They have playing cards they printed up with a unit logo on it and threatening message. They even have their own t-shirts: “Strike Fast, Strike Hard”.

There is a Shield soundtrack but a lot of modern hip-hop and hispanic music would work fine. They don’t play music a lot but as an accent or to set the mood for a new community or situation.

- Farmington

The district isn’t clearly defined which provides a lot of latitude to introduce new areas when you want them for plot purposes. A couple locations from the first two seasons were Echo Park and Koreatown. They do make references of other actual police precincts and real places in Los Angeles. It is urban with a mixture of cultures which exhibit themselves with ethnic markets and cultural societies, celebrations, music, and sports. Any culture you like can pop up there as yet another immigrant community.

- Catalog of Crime Locations

Chop Shops, Cockfights, Crack Houses, Whore Motels, Drug Mansions, L.A. River, Train-tracks, Warehouses, Liquor Stores, Underground Clubs, Gambling Dens, and any normal place: apartments, offices, stores, garages, etc. that could a front for illegal activity or just the backdrop of a random incident.

- Catalog of NPCs

The characters who populate Shield stories are criminals, victims, bystanders, and the police: Hookers, drug dealers, pimps, small time crooks, racketeers, bookies, killers, gang leaders, drug suppliers, informants, local celebrities, community leaders, paparazzi, etc. Criminals often have Nicknames: Pony Boy, Two-Time, bunny, Toad, etc.

- SAMPLE CHARACTERS

Detective Holland Wagenbach

- Lack of Confidence
- Doesn't speak Spanish
- Expertise in Serial Killing/Psychotics
- Race: White

Detective Shane Vendrell

- Crude
- Greedy
- Lustful
- Race: White

Detective Vic Mackey

- Spotty Record (A past of accusations of abuse and misconduct)
- Race: White
- Special Knowledge: Farmington Gang Culture
- Special Knowledge: Narcotics

Captain David Aceveda

- Race: Latino

Other traits: Media Hero (identified with past success, sought out by the media)

- DEFINING THE LAW

There is the TV version of the law which vaguely resembles actual legal statutes but can be used as plot points in telling the story. Don't get bogged down in legal details but set the basics up for the players:

1. Must have a warrant to enter someone's home to search it unless you have solid, probable cause (not just a hunch)
2. Evidence and crime scenes must be preserved to allow the ballistics, medical examiner, etc. teams to document everything.
3. Can't beat a suspect or they'll have cause for a civil suit for police brutality
4. Interrogations are video-taped
5. If a suspect requests a lawyer, you're supposed to stop asking them questions.
6. Arresting suspects require a reading of their Miranda rights.

Most of us are pretty familiar with what the relevant crimes are: robbery, murder/homicide, drug dealing, drug distribution, prostitution, child pornography, kidnapping, assault, gambling, extortion, auto theft, grand larceny, animal cruelty, trespassing, gun-dealing, etc.

- INSPIRATIONS FOR ADVENTURES

Beyond watching any of the seven seasons of the show, all you need to do is pick up a newspaper and read the headlines.

“Corruption stings U.S. side of the border, too.” – talks about all the different roles that could be corrupted, starting

with small gifts to a U.S. official's child, quickly becoming a chokehold on the officials. Something similar could occur from gang members, slowly corrupting an officer who wanted to be a straight arrow.

“Opium addiction crippling Afghan families” – With little translation, the article could be used to illustrate the scourge of drugs in Farmington.

- THE GANGS

“Although names of actual gangs are not used, the portrayals are based on real gangs.[11] Latino gangs with names such as ‘Los Magnificos’ (or ‘Los Mags’), the Byzantine Latinos (or ‘Byz-Lats’) and the ‘Toros’ are a constant thorn in the Strike Team's side in the early seasons of the show, whilst African American gangs become more prominent in later episodes. In particular, a gang calling itself the ‘One-Niners’ is central to the plot of Season 4. Like the notorious real-life Blood and Crip gangs, the One-Niners identify themselves strongly with one color (in this case purple), wearing it on various items of clothing.” – [http://theshield.wikia.com/wiki/The_Shield_\(TV_series\)](http://theshield.wikia.com/wiki/The_Shield_(TV_series))

- EXPLORING HUMAN ISSUES

The Shield is a gritty, realistic portrayal of these police characters. The fun in gaming an intense, realistic subject like this isn't the escapism, but the challenge of role-playing deep and flawed characters with integrity. The challenges they face are a catalog of modern social issues: homosexuality in uniform, co-dependent relationships (Vic and the

hooker), adultery, respect and self-confidence, dealing with the daily violence, us vs. them mentalities, the fuzzy lines of ethics, revenge, loss and grief, greed, lust, and the pursuit of power.

When do you follow the rules and when do you break them?

Do the ends always justify the means?

What does it mean to be a good cop?

How do you live with compromises to your integrity?

Shady characters should be anti-heroes, ones whose flaws outweigh appear to outweigh their virtues, but we hope for their redemption and success. There is certainly a degree of cool associated with being a badass.

The game can be used to explore “Partner” relationships. You have to trust each other and put your lives in each others’ hands. What happens when you lose that trust? What will you do if you discover they are dirty?

Some of the dynamics in the Barn are like going back to high school. There are jocks and geeks, teasing, hazing, pranks, inside jokes, and cliques.

- MORE RPG RESOURCES

A fan has mentioned that GURPS put out a SWAT book that would help more combat-oriented games of the Shield. There was also a game called “Mutant City Blues” which she describes as doing “a nice job of integrating system mechanics to lowish powered superhero detective work.”