

MISSION DESIGN

A personal how-to for crafting solid, memorable missions.

Designing interesting missions for Band of Blades can seem like a daunting prospect, particularly when those missions are centered on problems such as negotiation, mystery, or a social activity instead of combat. To craft solid missions, I use a specific methodology that has served me fairly well over the past few years, and I hope will work for you also.

There are three foundational considerations when creating a mission, plus a few optional considerations if you have the time or are still stuck. The main three questions to ask are:

- What is the clear, concrete objective of the mission?
- How do the rewards and penalties arise from the mission?
- What three obstacles are in the way of achieving the objective?

If you can answer these questions, you have a mission; otherwise, you need to go back to the drawing board and tighten things up. These questions can be applied equally to missions designed in the moment after the GM rolls, as well as to missions put together between sessions, depending on how you run your campaign.

ALL ABOUT THE OBJECTIVES

Missions must have *concrete objectives*. Missions are not just cool location ideas, what-if interactions, or an impressive set-dressing with possibilities. If there isn't a clear objective, or the objective is *hidden* somehow, you have a free-play scene, not a mission. That's OK. Free play scenes are fun and important too, and may create clear opportunities for missions.

To ensure you have solid objectives, ask yourself:

- What is it the Legion *needs* to achieve here?
- *Why* is the Commander sending the squad to do it?
- What *problem(s)* arises for the Legion if they fail?

An "objective" can change, or additional objectives might arise mid-mission, depending on the events that occur in play, or based on additional information gathered *in situ* during the mission. Don't worry about the possibility of "what might happen" and don't overthink it before play. Focus on what's in front of you.

REWARDS & PENALTIES

An important factor of mission design—as well as a helpful trick to determine the concrete objectives of a mission, if you are stuck or trying to make it feel more cohesive—is to look at the mission rewards and penalties, regardless if they were rolled randomly or specifically chosen. The rewards and penalties suggest both concrete objectives and potential obstacles.

To ensure the mission outcomes are tied tightly to the fiction, ask yourself:

- How or why does failing to achieve the objective cause the penalty?
- How or why does successfully achieving the objective avoid the penalty?
- How or why does successfully achieving the objective grant the reward?
- How or why does failing to achieve the objective deny the reward?

A word of caution: *avoid imagining specific action paths* that would lead to the results you've imagined above. Rewards and penalties are mostly about **what is at stake** on the mission rather than any specific actions to take or avoid taking during the mission; ie: “*The King-fisher Knight Joins the Legion*” might happen due to guile, brotherhood, intimidation and threats, a mystic binding, oath-swearing, or some other action, method, or reason.

Consider that a well-designed primary mission might have ways for a squad to *avoid* some of the penalties even if they fail to achieve their objectives, or to *gain alternative* or *additional* rewards or penalties, simply because the fiction establishes such as the result.

DEFINING OBSTACLES

The most common question a GM asks themselves is about the number and kind of obstacles a squad will face on a particular mission. I suggest creating three obstacles per mission: this provides just enough difficulty and fits well into a typical-length session. Freely adjust this based on your table's preferences and the desired mission difficulty.

What those obstacles should be is often the more difficult question: it is easy to fall back on enemy combat obstacles because they seem like the easiest to come up with, but try to save those for assault missions. *Let mission type guide the nature of the obstacles*, with the main or most complex obstacle(s) showcasing the mission type. Feel free to mix things up.

Remember that *obstacles aren't objectives*. They are complications and barriers that get in the way of objectives.

ORDER OF OPERATIONS

These questions do not need to be answered in exact order. Sometimes it is easier to determine the objectives or obstacles if you have already thought about how the rewards and penalties are involved. As you write things down, alter or change previous ideas as necessary.

To create a solid footing for the development of obstacles, ask yourself:

- What sorts of obstacles does this *mission type* suggest?
- How is the obstacle *in the way* of achieving the mission objective?

Remember: obstacles need to be open-ended, providing context without insisting on a solution. If an obstacle seems solution-based, think about how you can alter it into a problem—often, you can simply remove the verb(s) and see if it is still an obstacle or suggests what the real obstacle is (e.g.: *Silence the Alarms* becomes *Alarms*, but maybe that means *Sentries* is the real obstacle you’re thinking about).

Success against obstacles should be about reacting to how the players chose to approach the obstacles, not about characters taking specific actions or following a script in the GM’s head. Avoid coming up with solutions for obstacles, even for “mysteries” or “puzzles”—if you do have something in mind to help guide the fiction, be prepared and willing to change that “solution” if the players decide “the answer” is something entirely different, and successfully follow-through on their solution.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

While the above are the three basic things I consider when crafting a mission, when I have the time, there are a few additional questions that allow me to flesh out the details, provide things to think about, or add *interesting* narrative color.

COMMAND PRESENTATION

Consider how the mission objectives would be presented to the squad by the Commander; it can be useful to write this out as a short speech given to the squad when they are tasked with the mission which clearly outlines their mission goals.

With the complete answer to everything not more than two short paragraphs, ask yourself:

- What is the minimum possible outcome for success?
- What would the best possible outcome be for success?
- What should the squad avoid doing that would cause the mission to fail?
- What additional information should the squad know?
- What actions might the Commander suggest as ways to achieve the Legion’s goals?

These questions can spark ideas to tighten up a mission’s design, and you can give these details to the Commander player to work into campaign phase scenes.

ALL ABOUT TIMING

Clocks are a great way to provide tension or measure concrete advancement toward goals; they can also be used to show problems to be solved or avoided. You shouldn't necessarily tie clocks to the obstacles—it is OK if you do, but it can be more interesting if a clock only creates an issue if filled. Countdown clocks, especially racing countdowns, are always an interesting addition to a mission—for added tension, make the Legion success clock one step longer than a competing enemy clock. Three or fewer clocks per mission is best; it is also fine if some clocks you've imagined are never triggered and remain unused.

When considering clocks you might add, ask yourself:

- Is there a time restriction to achieve an objective?
- Will someone or something arrive or leave soon?
- Will a beneficial or dangerous event happen soon?
- Does an effort need to be measured?
- Does an event repeat?

When you use clocks, don't forget to tick them *as often as possible*, taking or providing opportunities to fill them with every action. This keeps the clocks relevant and interesting.

COMPLICATIONS

While complications and consequences are usually created in the moment, coming up with a few possibilities beforehand can: take the pressure off, provide a way to signal narrative ideas that interest you, or foreshadow events. And can be drawn on as Devil's Bargains.

To create a list of potential complications and bargains, ask yourself:

- Who or what else might make sense to show up here?
- What kind of clash could arise between squad members?
- How might a mission-vital item be lost or destroyed?
- Who might turn out to be lying or a traitor?
- What kind of deal might an intelligent enemy offer?
- How might the Legion's creed be tested?
- What environmental danger might arise?
- What kind of event would you like to see happen?

Don't create a bunch of these. Three or four is more than enough. And don't force any into play if they don't fit the situation at the table, or if a player rejects one as a Bargain or Resists it—just move on. These are meant to be fun “what-if” possibilities, not core mission elements. Sometimes, these might be used to trigger a clock you have in mind!

GM QUESTIONS

Despite all this rich detail, there are often issues or facts you haven't considered or just can't decide on. This is good. Jot the question down, or use the following list to create open-ended fiction and "what-ifs?" to be considered during and perhaps answered in play:

- If you were to run this mission for a different group what elements might you alter?
- What questions haven't you answered about someone's motivations?
- What details haven't you decided on about the background or location?
- How might an event elsewhere alter the nature of the mission?
- Which other potential dangers might be in the area?
- What actions might have no effect when attempted?
- What are the *long-term* consequences of this mission's success or failure?
- Is there anything that might not be what it first seems?

Do not over-design the mission; leave any answers as possibilities only. You can even ask the players what they think about a question, providing a great opportunity for them to personalize the mission and pursue what they are most excited about and interested in.

OUTCOME FLOWCHART

If you are stuck on any of the above questions or certain details are still not gelling, you can imagine what a critical success, partial success, withdrawal, and complete failure for the mission might look like. This may spur ideas, or further improve the mission design.

Ask yourself:

- What additional, beneficial outcomes would a critical success here involve?
- What setbacks or problems would lead to only partial success?
- Why might a squad decide this mission is too dangerous and withdraw?
- What dangers and outcomes would a complete rout involve?
- How might the Legion, the Chosen, or locals react to ignoring the mission?
- What sorts of narrative consequences does the mission outcome cause?

This exercise is also often helpful to create context for secondary mission outcomes: what happened off-screen to the squad who went on that mission?

You may prefer to allow the players to make the decisions about the events and fates of those sent on the secondary mission, but coming up with some ideas ahead of time to use as prompts for your players can be very helpful.