

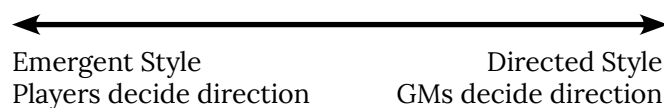
The Campaign Structure

We discuss the Sons of the Singularity approach to creating campaigns within this chapter. Before we get into the “how”, we should first set out some definitions and theoretical models. In the RPG hobby, like in many other things, we have terminology to which people have differing opinions. The terminology expressed here is just our own expression of game concepts and we do not pretend this represents a consensus opinion.

Story-Point Campaigns embody a “directed style” organized around plot points. In Story-Point campaigns, to some extent, the GM or an RPG designer directed the structure of the campaign. The organization could be very tight, with prescribed scenes, events, and set-piece battles. It could also be subtle, with “Fronts” (a term from *Powered by the Apocalypse*) representing a general inclination of major game-world factions and threats but no specific scenes nor story development.

On the other hand, there are **Sandbox Campaigns**, in which the players largely decide the entire direction of the campaign. We’ll call this “emergent style”. PCs decide where they go in a mostly boundless game world. The story or plot points encountered in the game entirely arise from within game play. In some Sandbox Campaigns, GMs (and designers) do not have the agency to determine events of the game world; they can only describe how the Game World reacts to PCs’ actions

The directed and emergent Style can be represented on a continuum:



On one extreme end of the spectrum, Player agency may be reduced to little more than placing a token on a hex map. On the other extreme end of the spectrum, GM’s may be denied sufficient agency to build plot points and a coherent story arc, and in some games the role of the GM has been completely obviated.

The SOS design philosophy for campaigns is to empower the GMs to develop and expand upon their campaign with a healthy balance between directed and emergent styles. We want the GM to have the power and authority to introduce plot points and explore coherent story arcs. However, we also firmly believe that, as much as possible, the direction and the “destination” of a campaign should be determined in an emergent style, based-off of player decisions and contributions to the game world.

Parts of a Campaign

The diagram on the opposite page is a visualization of how we might assemble a campaign that balances player agency against the GM’s ability to present a coherent story arc,

1. Campaign Genre

Genre is usually (but not always) set by the game designer and agreed to by players at the table before everyone sits down to play. “High fantasy”, “science fiction”, and “Cthulhu horror” are examples of genres. Between the Devil and the Deep is a historical pirate genre campaign.

Genre should include the “feel” of the campaign, which should be communicated to players and agreed upon. For instance, if the GM is planning a goofy comedic campaign set in historical WW2, it quite important that all the players buy-in to this plan. Campaign buy-in involved building a consensus around the social contract at the table, including genre, feel and rules.

Usually, players agree to the genre before the game starts when they pick a game to play, and everyone has a similar understanding of the conventions of that genre. Hopefully, the game system used at the table is able to support the genre and the desired play style. This is a pertinent point when selecting a game system; very often, GMs and players choose RPG systems based on familiarity, not appropriateness. *Trail of Cthulhu* and *Call of Cthulhu* play very differently, but both include detailed rules for how to simulate player-character insanity. These insanity rules are not really relevant to a *Swords & Sorcery Fantasy* campaign. *Dungeons & Dragons* simulates a “0 to Demi-God” PC power progression, which should be reflected in D&D campaigns, but is not really appropriate for campaigns involving regular people facing Eldritch horrors in the 1920s.

We believe that players and GMs should share a common understanding about how a particular game balances player agency and GM direction before they begin play. Please find herewith a Ground Rules sheet, customized for the Shamus RPG system. Using the Ground Rules sheet may help your table avoid confusion and conflicts; usage is optional.

We recommend that Campaign Hooks establish how the PCs meet and the common goal(s) they pursue. Strong Campaign Hooks often place the PCs within a singular Faction and often identify key NPCs in that faction.

The Campaign Hook may decrease in relevance as the campaign progresses. New campaign hooks may take over as the PCs develop their own goals and the Factions change. For example, in the scenario provided for the SOS published campaign, “Rational Magic”, the PCs start off as indentured bond servants to a mage, who gives them assignments; that’s the hook. But the PCs may decide to rebel at some point; thus completely changing the Campaign Hook.

4. The Rundown

The “**Rundown**” explains what is happening behind the scenes leading up to and during the scenarios of a campaign. In SOS horror setting books, we call this “The Horrible Truth”, a euphemism of unknown origin brought into popular use in the world of RPG design by Kenneth Hite and Robin Laws, “Trail of Cthulhu”. This information is mostly unknown to the PCs and may be discovered during the course of play.

One way to think of the Rundown is to consider what the relevant factions and antagonists have done and will continue to do if the PCs never get involved in the scenario.

The Rundown should include the following:

- Summary of what the antagonists have done to this point and what they plan to do.
- Motivations of the antagonists.
- Some explanation of the antagonists’ decision-making process so that the GM can develop future antagonist reactions.

5. Scenario

The “scenario” is the heart of a Story-point Campaign. It typically contains a self-contained plot or story that contributes to the Campaign’s overall story arc. The GUMSHOE rules offer more details and advice into how to organize an investigative scenario, but we believe these rules apply to any scenario which require the PCs collect information in order to move the scenario forward. We make use of that approach and supplement it here.

We recommend scenarios be organized along a **Narrative Framework**. Narrative Frameworks is a basic outline and scenario structure without specific details. It includes the background behind the scenario,

a method for PC involvement, and a (usually) loose ordering of possible scenes. Specifically, Narrative Frameworks include:

- The Rundown
- A Scenario Hook
- The Spine

First, the GM builds out the **Rundown**, identifying what antagonists want, have done, and will do absent intervention by the PCs. This informs the GM about what information and clues may be discoverable by the PCs during the campaign. We define the Rundown as being outside the scenario, as it’s an evolving campaign element which may be shared with more than one scenario. However, the Rundown is necessary to include in the Narrative Framework so that the GM can have a clear picture of what the antagonists are doing “off-screen”.

The **Scenario Hook** resides at the beginning of a scenario and pulls the PCs into the story. While the campaign hooks establish overall goals and provide a general reason for the PCs to work together, the Scenario Hook is the specific circumstance or event that starts the PCs on their investigation or adventure.

The campaign hook for the Sassoon Files is that the PCs all work for Victor Sassoon. One Scenario Hook takes the form of a secret invitation to Sassoon’s penthouse where Sassoon reveals the discovery of a gangster’s exsanguinated body in an opium parlor. In Between the Devil and the Deep, the Campaign Hooks is that the PCs are all pirates belonging to the same crew. The first Scenario Hook is that the PCs are stranded in Havana and the local authorities will soon capture them if they don’t steal a ship or find other means to abscond from the city.

The **Spine** is the general organization of the plot within a scenario. A full scenario write-up has scenes which hang off the “fish bones” of a spine. However, when creating a Narrative Framework, only a short summary of each scenes is needed. We can later use the Spine to detail and “flesh out” our scenes.

When Sons of the Singularity creators (our team of writers and game designers) create scenarios, we will Narrative Frameworks as the basis of our scenarios. We also publish Narrative Frameworks by themselves, without fully developed scenes, for GMs can improvise their own scene descriptions.

Scenes are populated with information, clues and challenges that propel the plot. The plot progresses along the central spine, with a node at each intersection of a fish bone. The nodes are gates; PCs acquire clues

Campaign Genre

Campaign Setting

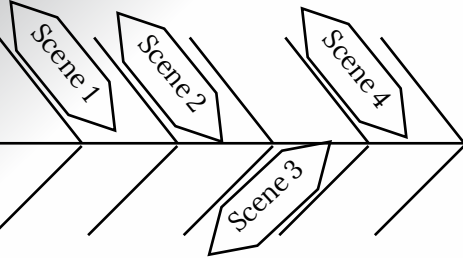
Campaign Hook

The Rundown

Scenario 1 Narrative Framework

PC Drives
Lore Sheets

Hook



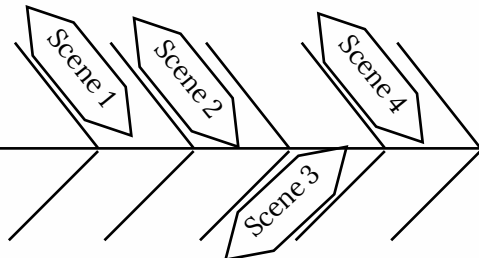
Unfixed Climax

The Rundown

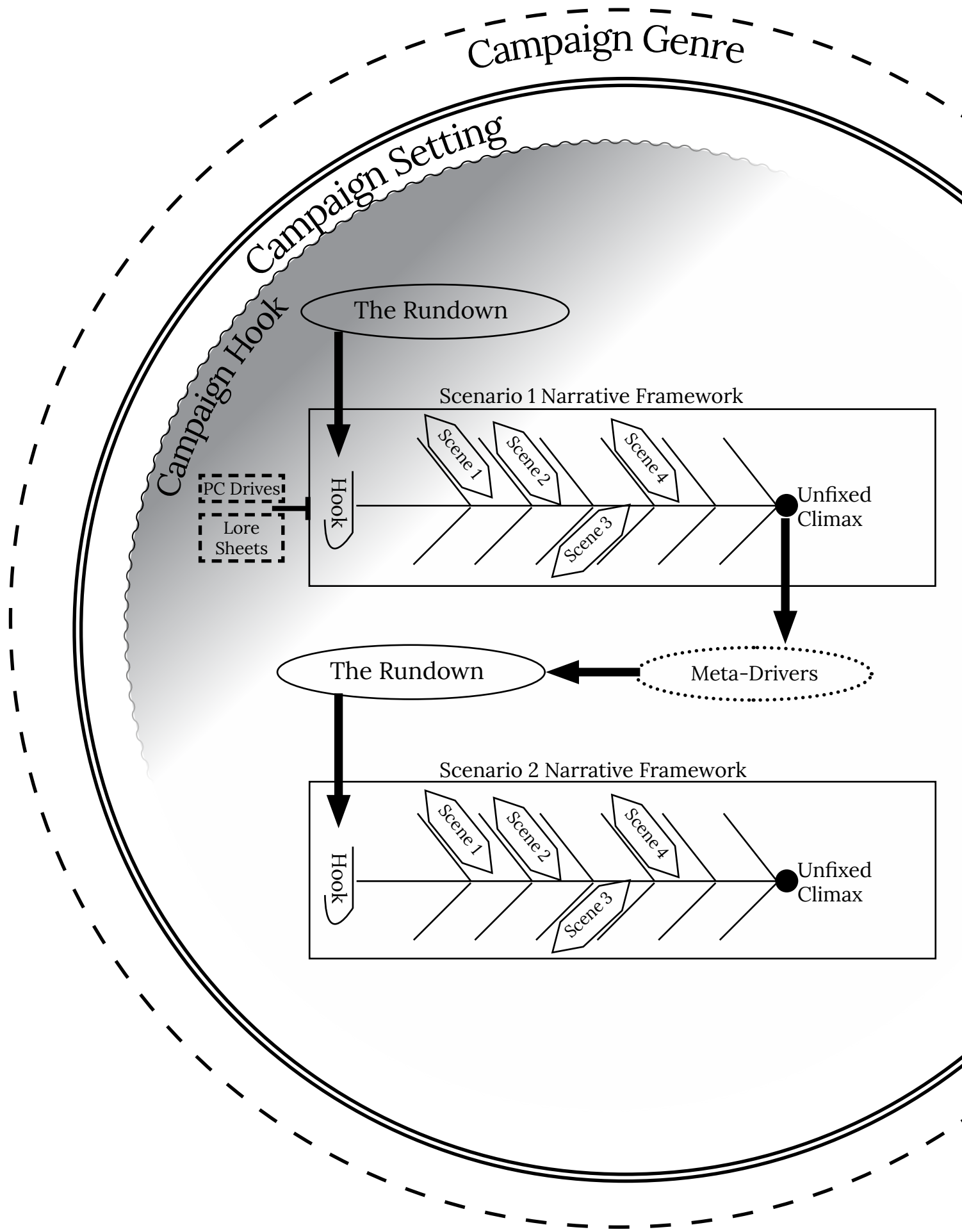
Meta-Drivers

Scenario 2 Narrative Framework

Hook



Unfixed Climax



2. Campaign Setting

Campaign setting loosely defines what is in the Game World. We think a campaign setting should set out:

- **Themes:** We prefer themes that are thought provoking and relevant to players. Themes can be righteous - like fighting for freedom and upholding justice. Themes can invite historical learning, such as calling attention to colonialism. Themes can be psychological and philosophical, such as exploring the effects of isolation and loneliness.
- **Time and Place:** Frame the campaign and defines the basic horizon of the Game World by setting out the campaign's time and place. Often, setting out time and place will define the player characters and their resources.
- **Factions and Recurring NPCs:** Critical for developing out the Rundown, Campaign Hooks, and Scenario Hooks (see below). Factions and NPCs will often determine the PCs' enemies and allies.
- **Game World History:** In historical games, this will tie the campaign to history, allowing real historical events to add to the excitement of the fictional game world. In campaigns with more fictional settings, some amount of game world history is immersion, narrative creation and roleplay. This does not mean that a full history book is needed to get the PCs involved in the game world. Campaign creators and GMs should, as much as possible, "show, and not tell". We strongly recommend the use Lore Sheets to convey important game world history.
- **Technology & Equipment:** Some suggestions on what is and is not available is important to give to the players so that they can understand what tools they have to work with. GMs do not want to have to tell younger players that their roaring 20's characters can't pull out their mobile phone to aid in the research of the occult.
- **House Rules:** Supplemental rules and deviations from the rules as written should be explained up-front.
- **Elevator Pitch:** This helps attract players to the table with a well thought out short summary (also used for Kickstarter promotion!). Consider for example: "Horror in the Pearl of the East! The Sassoon Files will be a set of scenarios and campaign resources for Call of Cthulhu 7th Edition and GUMSHOE role-playing games (RPGs) set in historical 1920s Shanghai; an international city of intrigue, espionage, style and violence." Additionally, "Rational Magic is a campaign filled with investigation, intrigue, and espionage set in a gritty dystopian fantasy world; a world that evolved from a traditional sword and sorcery setting."

Often players have strong expectations and assumptions about the settings based on the genre. Some settings are well-known and understood: classic fantasy, wild west, Mythos horror, etc.. Some well-known settings

are proprietary; based on popular movies and books, such as Marvel superheroes and Star Wars. Other settings are more exotic or less familiar. For example, Shanghai in the 20s, Palestine in the time of Jesus, and the world of Rational Magic.

Many intrepid GMs - in collaboration with the players at the table - reject "pre-packaged" settings embedded in well-known settings, preferring to create their own customized settings. They endeavour to build their own game world from scratch. The challenge here is that less well known, less defined settings may be difficult to explain to players. GMs and players, alike, need efficient ways to flesh out a campaign setting. Lore Sheets address these pain points. Sons of the Singularity provides the Lore Sheet rules in part to help players understand things that are in the setting, as well as give them a tool for adding to the Game World.

3. Campaign Hook

Campaign Hook ties the PCs into the campaign setting. A strong Campaign Hook can be the difference between a satisfying long-term campaign and a failed campaign. The Campaign Hook can be rolled out to the PCs during the character generation process or when the first scenario starts.

The campaign hook could be the PCs faction or a general identity group with which the PCs associate. In most high fantasy campaigns, the PCs belong to a party of wandering heroes; this is their campaign hook. In the opinion of the authors, it's not a very sophisticated hook because it doesn't provide much in the way of direction and it relies heavily upon the players' understanding of fantasy tropes. Campaigns set in unfamiliar locations and times require stronger Campaign Hooks to justify the formation of an "adventuring party". Likewise, Campaigns with unique, hybrid or genre-bending settings benefit from the deployment of a strong Campaign Hook.

In SOS's "The Sassoon Files", Victor Sassoon is the PCs' employer. Sassoon can be thought of as a faction leader and has his own secret knowledge and reasons to engage with the PCs. However, "The Sassoon Files" also provides alternative Player Factions and Campaign Hooks wherein the PCs may start out as members of the Chinese Communist Party, performing missions for Zhou Enlai. or as members of the Green Gang working for Big Eared Du. The scenarios in the campaign change because the campaign is approached from an entirely different Campaign Hook.

or accomplish specific tasks before they progress down the spine. Two key points here:

- Multiple scenes (along the fish bones) provide different clues that can unlock the node. This allows different paths to story progression.
- Narrative Frameworks should be designed in such a way that PCs are able to work through the nodes or otherwise advance the story.
- The GM may freely move scenes and clues around during play.

In the SOS design philosophy, we believe that the climax of the story should not be pre-determined and should be driven by player decisions and agency. For this reason, we introduce the idea of an **Emergent Climax**, the climax or natural conclusion of the scenario's story, which has not yet been pre-determined, but will be determined by player decisions and agency during play.

Although the Emergent Climax is not pre-determined, campaign creators and GMs should identify critical pieces of information and clues that can be used in the next Rundown. We call this a **Connection Point**. The Connection Point is something that can be brought into the next scenario no matter the results of the Emergent Climax. The Connection Point does not need to be used during gameplay; the Emergent Climax often creates new, more relevant Connection Points. However, preplanning a few Connection Points will help with continuity.

6. Meta-Drives

“Meta-Drivers” are tools to shape the campaign settings from outside the remit of the PCs. In the SOS campaign “Rational Magic”, the Powers Game is a Meta-Driver in which the players assume the “character” of a faction and decide what these factions will do. The results of the Power Game is then distilled into the next Rundown, evolve the campaign setting, and lead to the fashioning of hooks for the next scenario. Meta-Drivers can take the form of collaborative settings creation tools (see the game “Microscope”, as well as the Powers Game in the “Lore System), or it could be influenced by random tables (see “Stars Without Number” and other OSR products). The game system Powered by the Apocalypse (PbtA) has been influential on our understanding of Meta-Drivers. PbtA uses “Fronts” to create lists of goals and activities various threatening factions (or just threatening events) are striving to undertake and will complete if the PCs do not successfully intervene.

We like to say that **“Roaming”** is a type of Meta-Driver. Roaming is our word to describe roleplaying that takes place outside of a scenario, such as roleplaying during

downtime events and “sandbox” play. After a planned scenario, the PCs may want to engage in another direction, which could be based on the results of the Emergent Climax from the preceding scenario, but also could be based on a desire of a player to explore something particular in the PCs background or in the Game World setting There are different ways to run a Roaming game and this book will not visit this topic. GM should keep track of what happened in the Emergent Climax, the previous Rundown, and Drives related to the Campaign Hook, all of which provide components for building the next scenario of the campaign.

7. Recursion

After the first scenario is complete, Meta-Drivers and Connection Points provide the seeds to build the next Rundown and from there the next scenario. This is a recursive process where the outcomes of the preceding scenarios and the Meta Drivers are used to develop what happens in the following scenario.

Recursive campaign design and Story Point arcs face a common conundrum: the emergent story developed from roleplaying contradicts and overwrites the pre-made spine of the campaign. When this happens, the pre-made plot may become irrelevant, which means that the GM invested time in creating content that doesn't get to the table or possibly invested money into a campaign book which goes mostly unused. Some RPG products are written in such a way as to not allow PCs the freedom to create an emergent story so that the whole campaign book remains relevant; Sons of the Singularity rejects this approach.

Sons of the Singularity designs scenarios for which the GM may adjust and modify to fit in with the latest Rundown. However, we do not dictate how the GM should do this; it's a creative exercise and challenge for the GM. The GM can always change the factions, antagonists and scenes. Scenes from a scenario can be played in different orders. On the other hand, new PCs can be introduced into the scenario. In fact, one way to connect different scenarios in a campaign is to introduce alternate Campaign Hooks. For example, if the PCs reported to the local warlord in the first scenario, a second set of PCs can be introduced later scenarios, reporting to a local rebel faction.

No matter how scenarios are connected, Sons of the Singularity products will not force the campaign to assume any specific direction. Furthermore, we strive to provide tools and structures for the GM to use so that there can be a balance between emergent narrative and plot points at the table.