

Channel 5

GAME MASTERING



SUB-SECTIONS

This channel has been divided into four sub-sections: **Other Rules**, **The Supporting Cast**, **Episodes**, and **Game Mastering Advice**. It has been written with the GM in mind, so when the text says "you," it is referring to the GM.

SUB-SECTION ONE OTHER RULES

NPC'S AND OOMPH

You'll no doubt have noticed by now that NPCs have no Oomph listed in their write-ups. Your first thought was probably something along the lines of, "Wow, what kind of idiots would leave out something so important?"

Well, the fact of the matter is, it was no mistake. NPCs have no Oomph. You read it correctly. They are sans Oomph. Just because they are Oomphless, however, doesn't mean they're up the creek without a paddle.

The Oomph Pool

At the beginning of each episode, the Game Master receives a pool of Oomph that he can spend throughout the course of that episode. The exact amount is equal to 6 plus the number of players participating in the episode.

Each time an NPC's Subplot come into play, an extra Oomph is added to the pool for the next episode.

Spending Oomph

The Oomph can be spent to help out any non-Goon NPC (see page XX). The GM may spend Oomph the same way PCs do, except that the "Creative Control" option cannot be used.

Gaining Oomph

Up to 4 Oomph can be gained per game, by activating NPC Subplots. You or the players can activate an NPC's Subplots, though each Subplot can only be activated once per episode. Whenever an NPC's Subplot is activated, add 1 Oomph to your pool of Oomph.

VILLAIN TRICKS

Once per episode, 2 Oomph can be spent from the pool so that the series' master villain or the villain who is the primary antagonist for the episode in question can pull off a Trick. Performing a Trick doesn't use up the villain's move or action for the turn. There are several different Tricks to choose from.

Villainous Escape

Master villains are experts at evasion, fleeing, or otherwise slipping away from the grasps of their heroic adversaries. If you use this trick, roll a die. If it comes up a 1 or 2, the escape doesn't work. Any other result indicates that the villain manages to get away and is no longer involved in the scene. You should describe how he pulls it off, though. Don't just say, "He disappears." Be creative and invent some kind of wacky manner in which he makes good his escape – a hidden escape vehicle, a secret trap door, a collapsing ceiling that conceals him while he hightails it, or whatever else you can dream up.

Trap

The master villain has a hidden trap ready to use against the unsuspecting good guys. You may choose to do it against one particular character present or up to 3 of them. Roll a die. On a 1-2, the trap doesn't work properly or the character(s) avoid it. Any other result indicates that the trap nails the character(s). If the trap was successful, you may distribute three Setback Tokens among the characters as you see fit.

Whether the roll succeeds or fails, you should describe the nature of the trap. The more intricate, the better, though simplicity has its charms as well.



Motivate

The master villain can inspire his Leaders and Henchmen (see page XX) to perform more effectively in combat by bellowing out orders, encouragement, or threats. Roleplay it accordingly and then roll a die. If it comes up a 1 or 2, the Trick fails to do anything special. Any other result allows all of his Leaders and Henchmen to gain a +2 bonus to all their checks for the remainder of the turn.

Big Speech

Master villains tend to be windbags. They hatch devilish plans and vile machinations... and they like to spew out all the details of it (In Excruciating Detail) This Big Speech can be distracting to heroes. Roleplay it out accordingly and roll a die. If it comes up a 1 or 2, the Trick fails to do anything special. Any other result imposes a -1 penalty to all their checks for the remainder of the scene.

Kaboom

Few things spice up an action sequence like the building coming apart at the seams while everyone dukes it out. Roll a die. If it comes up a 1 or 2, the Trick fails to do anything special. Any other result indicates that you should narrate something happening that would begin to make the place self-destruct. It doesn't have to be something the villain himself does, though it could very well be just that. Then, roll the die again, keeping the result secret from the players. Consult this chart accordingly.

Characters caught in the destruction are automatically Defeated.

Roll:	Time Until Destruction:
1-3	3 turns
4-6	4 turns
7-9	5 turns
10-12	6 turns

NPCs AND EXPERIENCE

The PCs aren't the only characters that can improve between seasons. NPCs get better as well. There are two methods you can choose from. It's suggested that you select one of them and stick with it throughout the entire series.

The Standard Method

The standard method follows the rules for improving PCs, except that NPCs cannot increase base Oomph, since they don't have base Oomph to begin with.

When determining whether or not an NPC is eligible for Experience Points, consider how much of an impact he made. See the guidelines below:

Villains

If the NPC is a villain, he should only be given an Experience Point for an episode in which he met at least one of the following criteria:

- The villain is the Master Villain and hatched a plot.
- The villain directly contributed to the Master Villain's plot.
- The villain directly opposed one or more heroes (PC or NPC) in a combat or chase sequence.

Heroes

If the NPC is a hero (or a neutrally aligned character), he should only be given an Experience Point for an episode in which he met at least one of the following criteria:

- The hero directly aided another hero (PC or NPC).
- The hero directly opposed one or more villains in a combat or chase sequence.
- The hero did something particularly selfless and brave.

The Freeform Method

The freeform method involves simply making some minor (or even major) adjustments to the NPCs' game stats as you see fit. This is the easiest method, but you have to be careful not to eclipse the PCs' abilities.

COMMERCIAL BREAKS

"We'll be right back after these messages."

That's a phrase that we all hated to hear while watching our favorite Saturday morning cartoons. Upon announcing the commercial break, the networks commenced to bombard us with advertisements for whatever products their sponsors wanted us to beg our parents for the next time we went to the store. The wait, however, was unbearable, for we just *had* to find out the fate of our hero who was last seen hanging from the cliff by one hand... or in some other equally precarious situation.

It seems only right then that these commercial breaks would play a role in a roleplaying game that emulated the cartoons of yesteryear.

When you call for a commercial break, everyone can get up and stretch their legs, make a quick dash to the kitchen to replenish the snack supply, or chitchat about the episode in progress. More importantly, there's going to be a roll-off. Both you and the player whose character has spent the most Oomph since the last commercial break (or since the beginning of the episode if this is the first commercial break) roll a die. Alternatively, you can select a random player. If you roll higher than the player, roll on Commercial Break Table 1. If the player rolls equal to


or higher than you, he rolls on Commercial Break Table 2. Follow the instructions given by the result of the table rolled upon.

Commercial Break Frequency


The frequency of which commercial breaks occur is entirely up to you. You may decide not to use them at all or you may wish to spring 3 of them upon the players in a given episode. The average amount is 1 or 2 commercial breaks per episode.

Roll:	Commercial Break Table #1:
1-4	No effect!
5	Snack Commercial! A random player must go refill drinks and retrieve snacks for everyone who wishes him to do so. In return, however, that player's character receives a point of Oomph.
6	Time to devise a new Trick! The master villain can perform an additional Trick this episode. This Trick requires no Oomph expenditure.
7	Bad Situation! The next check made by any PC suffers a -2 to the result. If the players think they're going to be cute and attempt a meaningless feat in order to suffer the penalty on a roll that doesn't matter, you may choose to hold the penalty off until the next check instead.


Kargorr Sez:
Aha! Tricks! This, my devoted followers, is where I, Kargorr the Magnificent, can show my true expertise! No villain in all of Cartoon Land can even begin to match wits with me when it comes to trickery and deceit! I wrote the book on such matters! No, really. I actually wrote a book on it called "Kargorr's Guide to Awesome and Deadly Traps". Unfortunately, few people had minds intelligent enough to comprehend the glorious knowledge packed into that wondrous tome!




Bravesteel Sez:
It didn't sell well, did it?




Kargorr Sez:
Define "sell well."




Kargorr Sez:
Commercial breaks are the worst! When people tune into a cartoon, what do they want to see?




Bravesteel Sez:
I don't know, but I have a hunch that you're going to tell us.




Kargorr Sez:
Correct, buffoon! But back to my point, when people tune in, they want to see... ME! They don't wish to be bombarded with insipid commercials for action figures (unless, of course, they are action figures of *me*) or dreadful public service nonsense! They want to see me! And commercial breaks just take precious screen time away from me, thus depriving viewers of what they want to see.




Bravesteel Sez:
rolls eyes ...which is you.



Kargorr Sez:
Which is me, yes!





8	Commercial for the villainous action figures! Until the next commercial break, non-Goon villains receive a +1 bonus to all checks they make.
9	Lost momentum during the break! A random PC loses a point of Oomph.
10	Continuity error! The GM may change one fact about the current scene upon coming back from commercial break. Generally, this alteration should not favor the PCs.
11	Commercial for villainous playset! Add 2 to the GM's Oomph Pool.
12	Overly long commercial break! Roll twice on this table, applying both results. Re-roll "no effect" results and duplicate results.



Roll:	Commercial Break Table #2:
1-4	No effect!
5	Schoolhouse Rock 'N Roll! The network plays an educational music video during the break. Until the next commercial break, the PCs receive a +2 bonus to checks they make that utilize any Trait that is mental in nature.
6	Time for Time-O! The network plays a music video about nutrition and other health facts during the break. Until the next commercial break, the PCs receive a +2 bonus to checks they make that utilize any Trait that is physical in nature.
7	Kid Power! The kids watching the show want the villains to fail so badly that it actually affects the show. A random player gets to force a villainous NPC to roll a Detriment Die when said NPC is getting ready to make a check. This must be declared before the roll is actually made and must be used before the next commercial break. It can only be used once.
8	Commercial for the heroic action figures! Until the next commercial break, the PCs receive a +1 bonus to all checks they make.
9	Commercial for heroic action figure with variant accessories! A random PC gains a new gadget to use temporarily. The PC effectively has a temporary Trait that represents a gadget or power, with a rating of 3. Once it has been used, the PC no longer possesses it. The Trait must be used before the end of the episode.
10	Continuity error! A random player may change one fact about the current scene upon coming back from commercial break. Generally, this alteration should favor the PCs. If the change is too far-fetched, the GM can force the player to revise it.
11	Commercial for heroic playset! The PCs gain an additional point of Oomph that lasts until the end of the episode.
12	Overly long commercial break! Roll twice on this table, applying both results. Re-roll "no effect" results and duplicate results.

HAZARDS AND THREATS

In *Cartoon Action Hour*, characters will encounter all manner of danger. While much of the danger is brought on by capable adversaries, there are other hazards that exist. This section discusses how to deal with some of them in the game.

Falling

The threat of falling off of tall structures, into deep chasms, or out of airborne vehicles is always a tense, nail biting experience... which is why the retro-toon writers used it as a dramatic hook so often.

Preventing the Fall

In game terms, a character that falls should usually be given a chance to make a check to grab onto something, with an appropriate DN based on the situation at hand (e.g., grabbing onto an oily surface is going to be more difficult than grabbing onto a rocky cliff). The Trait used should usually reflect the character's reflexes, agility, quickness or ability to think quickly.

If the character falls, he could suffer damage. The character makes a check, using a Trait that represents his ability to shrug off damage. The DN depends on the length of the fall. Treat this like a combat check versus the character.

Fall:	DN:	Example:
Short	0	Off a table or car
Medium	1	Off a single-story building
Long	2	Off a 2 or 3-story building
Very Long	3-4	Off a 4 or 5-story building
Extremely Long	5-6	Off a 6 to 10-story building
Unbelievably Long	7-8	Off a skyscraper or mountain

Soft Landings

One staple of the retro-toon genre was the "soft landing" – a wagon full of hay, a swimming pool, a pile of feathers, or anything else that fits the bill. Whenever a character falls into something that provides a soft landing, no damage is done.

Drowning

Okay, perhaps "drowning" isn't really a good term to use, since characters don't die from it (or from *anything* for that matter). In *Cartoon Action Hour*, the closest a character can come to drowning is being Defeated, which is still an unpleasant fate for a hero or villain.

A character can hold his breath for a number of turns equal to the rating of his endurance or swimming based Trait +3. Every turn the

character remains submerged after that, he gains a Setback Token. Armor or similar Traits don't protect the character from this damage, unless specifically designed to do so.

You can whip out any number of fun retro-toon clichés for characters who have been Defeated by "drowning" – he washes up on the shore, he was saved by primitives, he woke up long enough to grab onto a piece of driftwood, etc.

Fire

In most cases, fire was used in the retro-toons for two purposes.

The first purpose was as a plot device ("Oh no! The building burned down with the top secret documents still in it!"). The second purpose was as a barrier ("We can't get through that way... the hallway is an inferno!"). In game terms, fire is divided up into two categories:

Normal Fire: Because fire was considered extremely terrifying to children, you never saw people get burned up in the retro-toons. Structures, robots, and vehicles were fair game, but not organic beings. Every turn an inorganic character or object is exposed to fire, it gains 2 Setback Tokens. Traits don't protect against this damage (there's just too much fire around), unless specifically designed to do so.

Fire Attacks: Fire-based attacks (flame-throwers, dragon breath, etc.) are treated like any other type of attack, even against organic characters. The damage is attributed not to exposure to the flames, but to some type of chain reaction from them. For example, the flamethrower catches the wall on fire, which spreads to the ceiling, scorches the rafters, and causes one of the beams to fall down and land on top of the character. Unlike with "normal fire," Traits can protect against this type of fire damage.

Quicksand

It would seem that, in the world of the retro-toons, quicksand was practically *everywhere*. Sometimes, it was called something else and themed to various types of terrain, though let's not kid ourselves – it was the same darn thing as quicksand. They could name it a "sinkbog" until doomsday, but they couldn't fool us. We were too savvy for that.

In game terms, if a character gets stuck in quicksand, roll a die and divide the result by two. That's how many turns it'll take for the character to sink. Each turn, he can attempt to get out, taking an action to do so. This will likely require a check of some sort. Which Trait is tested will depend on the surrounding area and the player's imagination in concocting an escape plan. For example, if there are tree branches hanging low, the character may be able to reach one, thus using a finesse-based Trait. The DN starts out at 2 and increases by +1 each turn.

Once the character runs out of turns, he is Defeated. At this point, you'll need to devise a way for him to survive. Perhaps someone fishes him out or maybe the quicksand leads to a subterranean underworld.

SUB-SECTION TWO: THE SUPPORTING CAST

QUICK NOTE ABOUT NPCs

There's no disputing the fact that the PCs are the stars of the series. However, if they have no other characters to interact with, that fact is meaningless. They need bystanders to save, allies to rely on, and villains to do battle with. Otherwise, what's the point of being a hero?

That's where non-player characters (aka "the supporting cast") come into play.

Of course, this means that it falls upon the shoulders of you, the Game Master, to play these characters whenever the PCs encounter them. Furthermore, it's your job to create the NPCs. The latter is what this channel focuses on.

NPC GAME STATS

When designing "throw away" NPCs (i.e., NPCs that have very little impact on the game and will only be used once), don't bother giving them game stats. Just give them a name and a personality and call it good. As long as they seem interesting, you're ahead of the game.

All the other NPCs deserve more attention; they should be given full game stats. This may seem like a big pain in the neck, but you'll be glad you did it later on, because few things can drag down a series like underdeveloped NPCs. When creating an NPC's game stats, you'll see how he or she springs to life as the process continues on. It's a truly rewarding experience.

Using the System

Channel 3 presents a fully detailed set of rules for creating characters. It is recommended that you use it when designing NPCs. The rules for doing so are no different than for PCs, except that you do not buy Oomph. NPCs do not have their own individual pools of Oomph.

PoPP Total

When utilizing the character creation system, you should first determine how many PoPPs the NPC will have. Not all NPCs are created equal, so you shouldn't feel as if all NPCs should be built with the same amount of PoPPs.

For friendly or neutral NPCs, you generally shouldn't give them more PoPPs than the PCs. There are exceptions, such as if the PCs aren't playing the leader of the hero team.

Villainous NPCs are trickier, since they'll be the ones the PCs will go toe to toe with on a regular basis. If they aren't given an appropriate amount of PoPPs, the results could be disastrous the first time you send them up against the PCs. As you'll see in the "Villain Hierarchy" section, there are four categories of villains. Each type features guidelines on the number of PoPPs you should build them with.

- **Master Villains** should be built with at least as many PoPPs as any one of the PCs. For a more intimidating Master Villain, increase the PoPPs further, possibly even doubling the PCs.
- **Leaders** should be built with as many PoPPs as any one of the PCs.
- **Henchmen** are the most varied lot of villains. They can be built with a small amount of PoPPs or as many PoPPs as any one of the PCs... or anywhere in between. An average Henchman should be built with 75% - 100% of the amount allotted to PCs.
- **Goons** are not statted out the same way as other characters, thus they don't have traditional PoPPs, per se.

Not Using the System

If you prefer a more freewheeling approach to NPC creation, you can forego the rules and just give the characters what you think they should have, without messing with PoPPs. You should be extremely careful using this approach, however, especially in the case of creating villains. If a villain ends up being overwhelmingly tough and trounces the PCs without breaking a sweat, then it certainly doesn't facilitate "fun". Try to make the NPCs as balanced as possible.



Bravesteel Sez:

There's no right or wrong method for creating NPCs. Obviously, using the system will result in more balanced NPCs, but *not* using the system will save you a great deal of time. And that, my friends, is a fact.

Kargorr Sez:

Poppycock! Everyone knows that creating NPCs (or at least the villainous NPCs) without using the system will exponentially increase the game's fun factor! After all, you can design them to be as powerful as you'd like without the foolish fetters of this confining game system! As such, you will avoid creating namby-pamby bad guys who get trounced by the series' heroes!



Bravesteel Sez:

You are positively hopeless. And that, my friends, is a fact.

Kargorr Sez:

Stop saying that awful catch phrase!



HEROIC ALLIES

The primary heroes in the retro-toons weren't usually alone in their fight against evil. At the very least, they could claim to have at least a few allies that they could turn to for help. Often, they were supported by other members of a team or organization. Either way, heroic NPCs played an important role in the genre.

Heroic Ally Roles

Heroic allies are very different from one another in terms of their roles in a series. Below, we discuss a handful of these roles.

Lone Allies

When a series was set up so that the primary heroes were not a part of a larger team or organization, the use of lone allies was common. Typically, the lone ally was something of a plot device. If the heroes needed something that they couldn't do or obtain by themselves, the lone ally stepped up to the plate. As GM, you should use them in this fashion as well. If, for example, none of the PCs have any real knowledge of science, but needed to find out what a mysterious fungus is, the lone ally could be sought out to analyze it.

Some lone allies simply complemented the primary heroes' existing abilities. They might all be great fighters, but having a tough-as-nails lone ally join in the fray certainly would help their chances.

Teammates

Many series are set up so that the focus is on a team or organization. In *Cartoon Action Hour*, this means that the PCs will simply be a part of that team or organization. This means that you'll need to stat out the other team members. Just be careful that you don't step on the PCs' toes. Don't create team members who are too similar to them or you'll risk making the players think their characters are not pivotal and important cogs in the wheel.

Teammates can plug holes in the story and can be used as convenient plot devices. If you need the villains to take someone captive in order to drive the story forward, who better to fill that role than a teammate, a character the PCs will feel obligated to rescue.

Comic Relief

This seemed almost mandatory in the cartoons of yore – the cute or goofy characters the viewers either loved or loved to hate. Comic relief characters came in numerous varieties: the bumbling sorcerer, the spunky robot, the overprotective troll, the bubble-headed blonde bombshell, the cowardly but ferocious-looking beast, the cuddly pet, etc.

It's possible that one of the players may want to play a comic relief character as his PC or create one as the PC's Companion. Usually, though, they'll be independent NPCs.

Comic relief characters excel at getting themselves (and the PCs) into no end of trouble. This can be used as a tool for you to create adventure for the PCs. Perhaps the comic relief character wanders off and ends up accidentally releasing an evil Genie who rampages throughout the land. The possibilities are endless.

Lastly, don't forget that many episodes of the retro-toons concluded with the comic relief character saying or doing something "amusing" and all the heroes sharing a good, deep belly laugh. When you can't figure out how to end an episode consider using this device.

ROGUES GALLERY

The most common approach to villainy in the retro-toons was for the producers to develop a pool of bad guys that acted as a collective thorn in the heroes' sides. This rogues gallery would be drawn upon episode after episode, forming the bulk of the challenges that the protagonists had to face. More often than not, the villains in a rogues gallery were all part of a villain group or organization.

This formula was born from the fact that most retro-toons supported a line of action figures, which would be released periodically in batches. This meant that the rogues' gallery would grow as the series progressed from season to season.

Not every episode featured villains from the rogues' gallery. One-shot villains would take center stage once in a while for the sake of diversity. Certain series utilized these villains more often than others. Some series never used one-shot villains, while others used them all the time, in place of a rogue's gallery. Most series fell somewhere in between these two extremes.

If you plan for your series to have a rogues' gallery, then you should think carefully before creating the individual villains. Try to cover as many of the basis as you can. Most rogues' galleries contained a big powerhouse villain, a sneaky villain, a highly intelligent villain, and some kind of combat specialist (ninja, street fighter, archer, etc.). And let's not forget about the token female. That's not to say that these archetypes are mandatory, but you should at least consider keeping with the format to some degree in order to nab that retro-toon flavor.

Creating a rogues' gallery for your series has another practical advantage – it saves you time. Without one, you'd have to create at least one new villain prior to running each episode. If you have established a rogues' gallery,



however, just choose which of the villains you want to use this week and jump into the game.

Villain Hierarchy

The villainous organizations of the retro-toons always had a very pronounced pecking order. In *Cartoon Action Hour*, there are four categories that villains fit into:

- Master Villain
- Leader
- Henchman
- Goon

Master Villain

The Master Villain is the top dog of the group and is usually the one who founded the organization. While his underlings may constantly plot to overthrow him by means of manipulation, backstabbing or guile, there's a reason the Master Villain remains in the *numero uno* spot. Most often, the reason is because he's the craftiest of all the villains. He's the man with the vision and he's too cunning to be so easily ousted. Some Master Villains, though, maintain their status by sheer intimidation. In such cases, he is either physically imposing or has some manner of power (magic, weapons, etc.) that keeps the others in line.

Out of all the NPCs, the Master Villain is the one you should put the most effort into. He needs to be capable of holding the players' attentions throughout the series without boring them or making them groan with frustration when he hits the scene. This cannot be stressed enough. It's best to get it right before the series begins; otherwise you'll probably have to replace him with a more interesting Master Villain later on.

There are several things that every Master Villain needs in order to be successful:

Ego: All megalomaniac leaders have to possess an ego. It's what drives them to do what they do and makes them believe that they are the ones destined

to rule the world. Everyone must bow down to them and do their bidding. Or so they think. It's that sort of overconfidence that is both the biggest asset and the biggest flaw that Master Villains have in their arsenals.

It's an asset in the fact that it motivates them to aspire to "greatness". Without ego, they'd be nothing but henchmen for someone who *did* possess it. It is this factor that sets them apart from your run of the mill, rank and file ne'er-do-wells.

As mentioned, ego is also a severe detriment to Master Villains. It often makes them overconfident to a fault. They believe they are infallible and that those who oppose them are too stupid or weak to pose a threat to their brilliant plans. Until, of course, the plan goes up in smoke as a result. At that point, the Master Villain will usually shake his fist and proclaim, "You may have won this time, fools, but you've not seen the last of me!" before making good his escape.

When developing your Master Villain's personality, stop and think about his ego. You needn't analyze it too deeply (this ain't a terribly deep psychological game here), but consider how it affects his effectiveness. Is he prone to explaining his plans to heroes while they're in his "inescapable" death trap? Does he tend to announce his plots to the world rather than just carrying them out? Does he insist on being the one to push the big red button on the doomsday device even if it'll delay things?

Base of Operations: Any Master Villain worth his salt will assuredly maintain some type of defensible headquarters. It is usually located in a really cool place, such as an island shaped like a skull, a platform that allows it to hover thousands of feet above the ground, or at the very top of a dark mountain with storm clouds perpetually lingering about. These locales help set the mood and let the players know that they're dealing with one bad mo-fo.

There's no need to stat the headquarters out. Describing it is usually enough. Villain HQs were seldom consistent in the retro-toons. If the writers wanted it to feature a huge cannon, then, by golly, it would have a huge cannon in that episode. And in all likelihood, it wouldn't be there the next episode.

Distinctive Identity: You may be starting to think that all Master Villains are identical to one another since it's been established that they all have an ego and possess a headquarters. But the fact is, each Master Villain in the retro-toons was very different than the next. One aspect that helped in this regard was that the Master Villains had distinctive identities.

A distinctive identity encompasses several different nuances – a name, costume, speech patterns, idiosyncrasies, quirks, etc. All these factors go into ensuring that your Master Villain is a unique and unforgettable antagonist.

All your villains should have a distinctive identity, but the Master Villain requires a bit of special care. Another thing to remember is that your Master Villain needs to look like a *Master Villain*. It simply won't do for him to look like his underlings. He's a ruler and he should look the part. When someone glances at the show's rogues' gallery, there should be no doubt as to which one the Master Villain is. It should be plainly obvious.

The same can be said for the Master Villain's name. It should be something that grabs you by the cheeks and says, "Hey, this is the big-shot of the group!" It should be something that sounds grand and larger than life, possibly with some kind of title attached to it ("Commander", "Lord", "King", etc.).

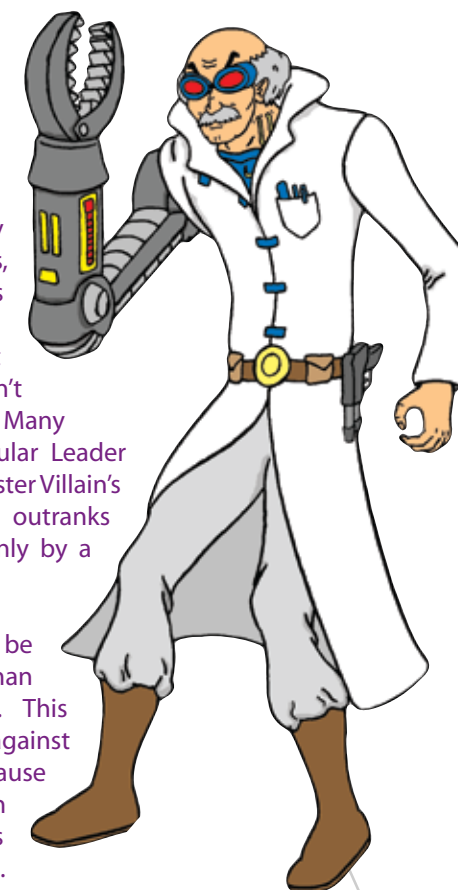
Leader

Leaders are the baddies that are directly beneath the Master Villain. They often act as taskmasters, leading lesser villains into battle or overseeing important missions that the Master Villain wouldn't entrust to anyone else. Many series have one particular Leader that is treated as the Master Villain's "right hand man", who outranks the other Leaders, if only by a tiny margin.

Leaders also tend to be more ambitious than Henchmen and Goons. This sometimes worked against the Master Villain, because this ambition often manifested itself as treachery against him. Many Leaders lie in wait until such a time that the Master Villain slips up, so that they can overthrow him and rule in his stead.

Some Leaders, on the other hand, are as loyal as can be. They stand by the Master Villain through thick and through thin, faithfully doing whatever he asks of them. This type of Leader doesn't seek to be the ruler of the group and is perfectly content with his position.

Most series have only one or two Leaders, especially in the beginning. After the first season, as new characters are added, you can toss more of them into the mix. Be careful, though. You don't want your villain organization to have more Leaders than Henchmen. As a rule of thumb, you



should have one Leader for roughly every five Henchmen. Some retro-toons featured more, though, and some didn't have even one.

Henchman

The bulk of "named" villains (i.e., non-Goon villains) in a series are Henchmen. They are competent bad guys in their own right, some of them even rivaling Leaders in terms of ability, but they simply don't have the clout enjoyed by the higher-ups. The only instances, when they are given any real power, is either when they are assigned to lead a squad of Goons into battle or when they are within their specialty.

Speaking of specialties, many Henchmen have one. It's common for them to have some skill, ability, equipment, or power that makes them incredibly proficient at one particular thing... but not much else. These Henchmen form a niche in the organization that is an invaluable asset to any resourceful Master Villain.

Not all Henchmen are specialists though. Many of them are well-rounded cretins, meaning that, they get more "screen time" because they are useful to the Master Villain in nearly any situation.

There's no set number of Henchmen allowed in an organization, though it is recommended that you have no less than 6 and no more than 10 to begin a new series with. You can always add more as the series progresses.

Goons

Peons, Cannon fodder, Grunts, Lackeys, and Mooks. Regardless of what you call them, these are the guys at the bottom of the totem pole. They are the faceless hordes that are sent out to attack the heroes en masse or to guard a structure of some kind. Of course, they almost always get their tails kicked, but so goes the life of a Goon.

A series should have at least one type of Goon. You can find out more about creating Goons below.

VILLAIN ORGANIZATION ARCHETYPE

What follows is a standard set-up for a beginning series. If you don't want to do all the groundwork yourself, use this template instead.

- x1 Master Villain
- x1 Leader
- x8 Henchmen
- x2 types of Goons

Creating Goons

Goons are the workhorses of nearly every villain organization. From mobs of robots and aliens to power armored soldiers and mutated slime people, Goons are the Master Villain's first line of defense.

When creating Goons, you must understand that they are not singularly tough enough to be a significant threat to the heroes. That's why they almost always attack in groups, which are referred to as *Goon squads* (3-6 Goons). They do not act individually on the battlefield, but as a team. All combat against them is handled by the rules for scene-based combat.

It should be noted that, while Goons are most usually the province of villain organizations, heroic organizations sometimes employ them too.

Goon Ownership

In most cases, the goons simply belong to the organization just like the other villains. They aren't attached to one specific NPC.

Points

You'll receive a certain number of points to spend on a single type of Goon. The exact number depends on how powerful you feel they should be. If you'd rather randomize things a bit, roll 1d12+5; the result is how many



Kargorr Sez:
In my vast experience, I've found that nothing screws up a good plan like incompetent goons! That being the case, I urge all you wanna-be masterminds to fire your goons and replace them with... well, I don't know... better goons! You will not regret it!



Bravesteel Sez:
Actually fans Kargorr was the one responsible for all his own failures. And believe me when I say he had a lot of failures to account for.



Kargorr Sez:
Feh. So says you, you mouth-breathing ignoramus!

points the organization receives for building its rank and file Goons. These points must be spread among the different types of Goons within the organization.

- **Lowest of the Low:** 4 points
- **Substandard:** 5 points
- **Standard:** 6 points
- **High Quality:** 7 points
- **Elite:** 8 points

Battle Rating

A Goon's Battle Rating functions the same as those belonging to normal characters. Of course, they tend to be lower, but that's to be expected.

Battle Rating:	Point Cost:
-3	1
-2	2
-1	3
0	4
1	6
2	8
3	10

Goon Modifiers -- Bonuses

You can spend points on the following Bonuses for your Goons.

Rugged

2 points. The Goon squad only rolls 1 die for the Battle Rating check, rather than rolling the usual 2 dice and using the lowest result.

Extremely Rugged

4 points. The Goon squad cannot have both "Rugged" and "Extremely Rugged". The Goon squad rolls two dice for the Battle Rating check and uses the highest result.

Vicious Assault

1 point. If the side with this Goon squad loses the combat, choose one of the winning characters. That character must make a DN 2 check using a Trait that measures toughness. If she fails, the character gains a Setback Token automatically. Protective Traits cannot protect against this.

Specialists

1 point. This Goon squad may be given a Trait with a rating of 1. While Goon squads can be given any Trait, the Trait cannot be used in combat. For example, a Goon squad can have "Good Fighters," but it would be pointless because all combat involving Goons utilizes its Battle Rating. This is mostly used

to create Goons that can perform other non-combat tasks, such as giving a Trait like "Repair" or "Communications" to a Goon squad designed to be mechanics and communications experts, respectively.

You may take this Bonus more than once. Each time it's taken, choose one of the following options:

- 1) Give the Goon squad another Trait with a rating of 1.
- 2) Add +1 to an existing Trait rating. A goon squad's rating cannot be more than 4.

Skilled Fighters

1 point. This Goon squad wins all ties on the Battle Rating check.

Mob Tactics

1 point. If the side with this Goon squad outnumbers the other side, each Goon squad with this Bonus adds +2 to its result. For purposes of determining whether or not the opposing side is outnumbered, count each Goon squad as 1 character.



Ensnare

2 points. This Goon squad can attempt to hinder the opponents by using tentacles, pincers, claws, nets or some other means of capture. Before the Battle Rating check is made, roll a die for each Goon squad with this Bonus. Each die that rolls 10-12 causes any one opposing character to reduce his Battle Rating by 2, down to a minimum of 0. If more than one of your Goon squads possess this Bonus, you can apply the penalties to enemy characters any way you wish. So, if two of the Goon squads have Ensnare and roll 10-12, you could choose to give two enemies a -2 penalty or you could give one enemy a -4 penalty.

Special Attack

2 points. This can be used to represent powerful weapons, flying-based swoop attacks, special powers, or whatever else you can conjure up. Roll a die before making the Battle Rating check. If the result is 1-6, the Goon squad receives no special bonus; if the result is 7-11, the Goon squad adds 1 to their check result. If the result is 12, add 2 to the check result.

Natural-Born Followers

3 points. When this Goon squad goes into combat alongside one or more non-Goon characters, add 1 to the squad's Battle Rating.

Goon Modifiers -- Restrictions

You can receive up to 4 points by taking Restrictions. Each Restriction write-up lists how many points you receive for taking it.

Dependent

+2 points. Unless the Goon squad goes into combat with at least one non-Goon ally, the squad is useless. The enemy automatically destroys it.

Weakness

+1 point. This is used for creating Goon squads that are vulnerable to something, such as the way aquatic humanoids might be less effective when out of the water or the way vampires are susceptible to holy symbols. Upon taking this Restriction, choose one substance, item, type of character, or situation. If this weakness is involved in the combat scene in any way, the Goon squad's Battle Rating check result is reduced by 4, down to a minimum of 0.

Fragile

+1 point. This Goon squad cannot be captured. They always either flee or are destroyed.



SUB-SECTION THREE
EPISODES

EPISODE STRUCTURE

While no two episodes are the same, most of them do have a similar structure. This structure has been used in fiction throughout the ages; so to say that it's time-tested is a woeful understatement.

Ideally, there should be three acts in an episode. Below, we'll break these acts down and look at what each one covers.

Act One: The Setup

The first act establishes the situation. Invariably, the situation (known as the inciting incident) is a problematic one. Otherwise, the heroes will be standing around with nothing to do during the episode, which is hardly fitting for a game based on the action-packed retro-toons!

In most episodes, this act will be the shortest. It doesn't take much time to set the episode up and give the players an idea of what mission their characters will tackle. In fact, the heroes may not even be involved in the first act... at least not immediately. It may be a "cut scene" (see page XX) that centers on one or more NPCs. Perhaps the master villain is planning to create a doomsday device, but needs three components in order to complete it. Act One could consist of two cut scenes in which the bad guys are shown stealing the initial two components. And perhaps a third cut scene could be implemented that involves the heroes being thrown into the situation, possibly by a superior ordering them to guard the third component or something similar.

There's something to be said for throwing the problem at the heroes right off the bat though. Doing so gives the players a reason to care about the problem more, since their characters are exposed to it first-hand. When taking this approach, be cautious. You don't want to get the heroes stuck in too deep this early. That's what Act Two is for.

Once the situation at hand is set in stone and the characters have been introduced to it, you're ready to move on to Act Two.

Below, you'll find some advice for creating the first act of an episode.



Kargorr Sez:

The moronic author is going to blabber on about constructing an episode in three acts. But she's an idiot so don't listen to her. Instead, listen to me, the greatest mind in the universe. All you need is two acts. In Act One, you must establish my ingenious scheme and let the heroes have some false hope about putting a stop to it. In Act Two, you have me kill the heroes. End of episode. See? Was that so hard?

Scripting

If the heroes aren't involved in Act One, or at least in a segment of it, you might consider writing a brief script for yourself to follow. This is particularly helpful if the scene in question is complex or requires a lot of specific information to be given to the players.

A script can be as simple or as elaborate as you want, so long as it conveys whatever it is you wish to convey. When you need a scene to be precise, scripting is the way to go.

The easiest type of script to write is one that resembles the script from a stage play. Simply write the characters' names and what they say. Actions are also denoted in the text where necessary, though this needn't be too prose-heavy. Direct and to-the-point is the most appropriate route.

Another no-fuss way to script a scene is to simply write an outline of what needs to happen, much like you would do for a speech. This allows you a sense of freedom, while still ensuring that none of the important elements are accidentally left out. This is probably the best method for those who possess good ad-libbing skills.

The last method up for discussion is the most comprehensive, but likely the most rewarding as well. You can write out the scene in a short story format and simply read it aloud. Keep the text short, though, as there's a fine line between playing a game and listening to the GM read a full-fledged story. You don't need to write a novel in order to create an effective cut-scene with this method.

The Art of Inclusion

It is during Act One that the players will get a glimpse at what lies ahead for their characters. In most cases, the heroes will get a glimpse too. When laying out an episode, it's your job to bring the problem to the heroes... or bring the heroes to the problem. Either way, you have to find a way to get the ball rolling, which is really what Act One is all about.

There are always cut-and-dried options, such as having the boss assign the heroes a mission to go on or something equally obvious. Such options are fine and were, in fact, used liberally in the retro-toons. However, it's far more rewarding to exercise your creativity to devise more imaginative ways for drawing the heroes into the plot. If nothing else, these scenes of a more original nature can be sprinkled into the mix to keep the less original scenes from being too dominant.

Introducing New Elements

One of the most important roles of Act One is to introduce new people, places, and things that are (or will be) important to the story. If a new NPC, for instance, shows up halfway through the episode, the impact of the character's appearance will be diminished significantly in most cases. The players will probably be more baffled than anything.

Wise GMs utilize Act One to lay an immediate impression of the new element. If it's an uber-gadget, demonstrate how awesome it is. If it's a location, show the players why it's interesting. If it's an NPC, give the players an idea of what he's like. The best time to do this stuff is during the first act.

Act Two: The Confrontation

The second act is where you'll find the meat of the episode. It's the segment in which the heroes struggle to solve the problem(s) established in the first act. That is, the heroes confront the problem in an attempt to make things right. Act Two will conclude with the climax (see below).

Creating the basis for this act is all about pacing. You must try to plan for the most likely contingencies and cover as many bases as you can. Players are a crafty lot and will as often as not do something that you couldn't have possibly predicted. As long as you consider some of the more common contingencies, you should be okay. Should the players go off the beaten path, you should ad-lib wildly or attempt to sneakily guide them back onto the right path. The latter option is tricky, as you could find yourself railroading the players, which will lead to their frustration at their lack of choices. Guide them; don't force them. There's a big difference.

Once you do some planning, jot down a few notes about possible encounters or scenes that might spring from the contingencies. Some sequences might happen regardless of the choices made by the players. For example, if you planned to have the villains capture an NPC, there's no reason that

the event won't still occur if the PCs have decided to take a drastically different course of action than you had anticipated. Or perhaps the villains have been shadowing the heroes with the intent to lay waste to them as soon as a good opportunity arises. The attack will most likely be carried out no matter where the heroes decide to go. Such events are mandatory.

Below, you'll find some advice for creating the second act of an episode.

Escalation

The problem was established in the first act, but it is during the second act that it escalates into a bigger problem. In the retro-toons, few things happened on a small scale. Everything was big and grandiose! For this reason, you should see to it that your episode follows suit. Don't have your villain threaten the existence of a building when you can have him threaten an entire kingdom, an entire planet, or, heck, even the cosmos itself! Think big. It's okay to make things look small-scale in Act One, but in Act Two, the stakes should be raised.

Active Villains

Villains aren't just going to stand around and wait for the heroes to thwart them. They're going to further their plans. It's crucial for them to remain active during the second act. Otherwise, your episode will be too static and predictable. If the heroes are making their way to the villain's lair, let the villain find out what they're up to... and have him do something about it. Perhaps he could send forth a gaggle of his underlings to deal with them or maybe he could retreat to an alternate lair. He might even attack them himself. As long as the antagonists are doing something, your game will go okay.

It might help to get inside the mind of the main villain. Try to figure out what he would be doing while the protagonists are trying to defeat him. Turn things around and try to *become* the antagonist and feel what he would feel; do what he would do. Looking at the story from the villain's perspective is always a good idea.

The Heroes Defeated?

Many, but certainly not all, episodes of the retro-toons ended the second act with the heroes in a bad way. The most common use of this mechanism is that the heroes' plans to stop the villain have been crushed and all hope seems to be lost. Things look bad for our intrepid good guys. It's also a very good place to insert a commercial break, as it gives the players a chance to discuss alternative courses of action. Plus, it builds suspense.

Don't over-use this plot device, however. Constant utilization will lead to predictability ("Oh, jeez, it's just about time for us to be greatly imperiled... again."). When used in moderation, it can add drama to the episode, but when used too often, it can suck the drama away from it instead.

Don't Give Up

When writing Act One, it's likely that your cool ideas are going to get you jazzed up about the rest of the episode. This is a great thing, but a lot of Game Masters hit a stumbling block when writing Act Two because it is a much more involved process. Act Two is the meat and potatoes of any episode, so it stands to reason that plotting it is going to take more work. Sometimes, those cool ideas from Act One have to be massaged and even altered in order to flow into Act Two.

All this can lead to frustration, as you begin second-guessing yourself and saying, "This isn't working." Many Game Masters give up writing the episode at this point. When you feel like quitting, step away for a little while and take a deep breath. Do whatever it is you do to relax and then come back to the episode with a less beleaguered mind. This helps a lot!

Avoid being married to an idea you developed in Act One. By all means, knead the heck out of it and do your best to make it work for Act Two, but if you just can't get it right, don't be afraid to scrap the darn thing and go back to Act One. Scrapping an idea and halting the writing of an episode are two very different things. Quitting shouldn't even be an option. Press on and design an episode that will knock your players' socks off!

Act Three: The Resolution

Act Three is the act in which the problem at hand is resolved and the story concludes. In a nutshell, Act Three is the climax of the episode.

And with the climax comes the big climactic scene that results in the pay-off for the players. This scene invariably leads to the final outcome, which is usually the triumph of good over evil. The climactic scene is, more often than not, a combat sequence. Still, in the retro-toons, many climactic scenes were of a less violent nature. This is a positive thing, as it detracts from the episode's predictability.

The closing scene of Act Three is often called the denouement and it's generally defined as a period of calmness, where a state of equilibrium returns. The nature of the denouement can vary wildly, but there was one type that was gratuitously



employed by the retro-toon writers. It involved the protagonists verbally wrapping things up, when suddenly, the token comic relief character said or did something funny. Everyone enjoyed a hearty laugh and the credits rolled. While that ending was the norm, less typical endings were presented as well. So, it's okay to use the tried and true ending, but you shouldn't feel less inclined to pull off one that's completely unique. This is your series, after all.

Below, you'll find some advice for creating the third act of an episode.

Location, Location, Location

While you should take into account interesting locations for battle sequences in *any* act, the one you choose for the climactic battle sequence (if indeed there is one) should be particularly memorable. Battling on a flat surface with nothing around can lead to a boring fight. But if you plunk the heroes and villains into an area bristling with assorted props and an intriguing layout, then you've already gotten a head start on developing a fun battle scene! Here are some ideas for battle locations: construction sites, moving trains, downtown areas, winding back-alleys, the corridors of a space station, on the deck of an aircraft carrier, ancient ruins, thick jungles, the top of a skyscraper, maze-like parking garages, floating cities, factories, castle battlements, zoos, amusement parks, shopping malls, warehouses, museums, gargantuan suspension bridges, craggy cliff sides, pyramids, junkyards, sewers, frozen rivers, rope bridges, deck of a rocking ships,

clock towers, marshes, active volcanoes, abandoned mines, collapsing tunnels, busy highways, sinking ships, art galleries, scaffolding, supermarkets, elevator shafts, parades, low-gravity worlds, underwater valleys, sunken ships, famous landmarks, and so forth.

The Big Escape

You don't want to create new villains every time you prepare to run an episode do you? Of course not. This is why you need to concoct a way for the villains to avoid capture, death, or at least the master villain. Best of all, such escapes really keep to the spirit of the genre, as the retro-toons were notorious for this kind of thing. Villains can be defeated, but be careful with letting them be imprisoned by the heroes. You'll find your rogues gallery dwindling with each passing episode... and that's not productive for the series as a whole.

It's acceptable to allow the villains to be captured during Acts One or Two, since they can always escape or be rescued later on during the episode. But Act Three marks the last segment of an episode, so it's harder to spring captured villains at that point.

If the master villain is taken into custody, you should spend your Oomph on the "Villainous Escape" Trick (see page XX). Doing so is considered good form.



Kargorr Sez:

Escape?! ESCAPE?! What kind of master villain tries to escape? Any villain worth his salt will stand and fight to the end, giving those no-good heroes a sound thrashing.

Bravesteel Sez:

So, you're not good at escaping?



Kargorr Sez:

OF COURSE I AM, YOU FOOL! I mean..err..well...

Bravesteel Sez:

I thought you said that you never try to escape.



Kargorr Sez:

Gah! It was trickery on your behalf! Trickery!

Ultimately, objectives can be broken down into several categories. These categories are not meant to restrict you in your plotting. Rather, they are relatively wide open, allowing you to work within the framework they provide. You'll find that they are surprisingly versatile. You could create two episodes in a row using the same category and still make them drastically different from one another. Let's look at these categories:

Capture: The heroes must apprehend one or more characters.

Defend: The heroes must protect one or more locations, objects, or characters.

Deliver: The heroes must bring one or more items, characters, or pieces of information to a designated place/person.

Destroy: The heroes must blow up or otherwise get rid of one or more objects or locations.

Escape: The heroes must escape or avoid capture by one or more enemies.

Fix: The heroes must repair a device or gadget.

Infiltrate: The heroes must sneak into a location.

Recruit: The heroes must convince one or more characters to join their side.

Rescue: The heroes must find and release a trapped or imprisoned character.

Retrieve: The heroes must locate one or more objects and bring it/them to a specified destination.

Scout: The heroes must check out or investigate something (a rumor, an area, a person, etc.).

It's possible to integrate more than one objective into an episode, though you should do your best to keep the story from becoming convoluted. In most cases, it will suffice to stick with one.

SECONDARY PLOTS

When designing an episode, you might consider adding another plot that is less significant than the primary plot. These are called secondary plots and they really don't have to take up that much room in your overall episode. How important they are is up to you, so use your best judgment.

The retro-toons regularly used secondary plots to bulk up an episode's content and to flesh out the characters more. You can use them for the same reason, but with an added bonus: it gives characters that may not be directly involved with the primary plot something to do that is still constructive to the story.

For example, let's say that your primary plot, for a *Warriors of the Cosmos* episode, revolves around Nekrottus capturing Iconia's greatest minds and forcing them to create for him a weapon of mass destruction. Obviously, the heroes are going to try to put an end to this madness. A secondary plot could be that one of the male heroes meets a sweet girl during Act One. They take a liking to each other and he finds out that her father is working on an important scientific experiment. She tells him that her father needs one important component in order to succeed and asks the hero to help. In truth, her father is willingly working for Nekrottus and needs the part for the doomsday device. The girl may or may not be wise to this fact. So, one hero may find himself inadvertently doing Nekrottus's bidding.

Not all secondary plots have to be tied directly to the primary plot, but you should be sure to draw both plots to a close during Act Three. To do otherwise would make the episode seem off kilter.

Don't forget that a fantastic source of secondary plot ideas could be the PCs' Subplots. You can mine those for all they're worth and the players will usually be happy about that, because they'll have the opportunity to earn Oomph by coping with the problems that arise.

USING THEMES

A good story can work on multiple levels. Even in the retro-toons (which tended to be more about fun than about deep meaning), the writers often subscribed to this belief. The most common method of doing so was to develop the story with a theme in mind. A theme is an underlying message, morality, philosophy, or weighty issue that can be woven into the fabric of the story to evoke a more meaningful experience.

You too can use themes when creating episodes. In fact, you are encouraged to do so. If you think back to the old cartoons, you'll recall, that some of them had a "moral of the story" after-show message. That's what theme is all about.

Instituting a theme may sound heady and intimidating, but it's actually easy. Before starting on Act One, ask yourself what you want the overriding message of the episode to be. Let's say that you choose "teamwork" as your theme. At that point, you should think ahead a bit and come up with at least one idea for making teamwork be the key to solving a problem during the episode. It doesn't need to be fleshed out yet; you just need a seed. Perhaps you want to introduce a foe that's so powerful that none of the heroes could defeat it in a one-on-one confrontation. You could even take that a step further and plan it so that even the combined might of all the heroes would be insufficient to defeat it... so that they'll actually have to team up with the villains in order to do so.

The trick to instilling a theme is to make it subtle. You needn't bonk the players over the head with it to make it work. In fact, it's usually best if the players don't get it until the inevitable "moral of the story" segment at the conclusion of the session.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Most retro-toon series kept their episodes... well, episodic. That is, each episode was its own self-contained story that didn't carry over directly into the next episode. The advantage of this, of course, was that viewers could tune into any given episode without getting lost. The disadvantage was that the stories were limited in their breadth due to the fact that everything had to fit within a snug 22-minute package.

It wasn't uncommon, however, for the writers to craft a two-part or three-part story on occasion. This allowed them to tell a more epic story than they could within the normal restraints

OBJECTIVES

An episode without an objective is not much of an episode. You've got to give the PCs something to accomplish, lest they'll wander around aimlessly waiting for something to happen. The objective of an episode can be as simple or as convoluted as you like. As long as it provides a goal for the heroes, you're on the right track.



of a single episode. Therefore, you can whip up some multi-part stories for your own series. In such a case, develop the overall story using the three-act structure. If, for example, you are going with a three-parter, Act Three would occur during the third episode, though it may not take up the entirety of the episode.

Each episode (except the final episode) almost invariably ended with three words emblazoned upon the screen: "To be continued..." And just as invariably, these words would

appear just as a cliffhanger situation was established. This made the viewer anxious to watch the next episode to find out what happened to the heroes. Such devices can be used in Cartoon Action Hour as well. Just be prepared to have impatient players chuck things at you as soon as you say, "to be continued!"

SUB-SECTION FOUR: GAME MASTERING ADVICE

THE JOBS OF THE GM

The term "Game Master" says it all. An emphasis must be put on "Master," for these two words so perfectly sum up what you must strive for as the GM. What must you try to master?

We're glad you asked.

Master of Storytelling

You are, in many ways, the primary storyteller. It's true. While the players have a gigantic impact on how the story unfolds, you are the one who knows what is really going on. You know about the ambush the bad guys have set up. You know when the main villain will strike. You know that the player's "buddy" is really in cahoots with the enemy. You know that the niece of one of the PCs is going to get kidnapped.

Of course, the PCs' actions can drastically affect all this stuff. After all, it's no fun for players to be railroaded by a pushy GM who already has everything etched in stone. You must be able to roll with the punches and improvise wildly in order to give the players freedom. Remember, this is an interactive storytelling game. And there's nothing interactive about stubbornly refusing to change things according to the PCs' actions.

The trick is to find a balance between totalitarian GMing and being an absolute pushover when it comes to how much freedom you give the players.

In any case, you control the pace of the game, the events that the PCs must deal with, who the bad guys are, and so on. For this reason, you should work toward becoming the master of verbal storytelling. The better you describe the scenes and events, the more enthralling the game will be.

Master of Acting

The players play the main heroes. You play everyone else! Any time the PCs meet up with another NPC, guess who steps into the shoes of that character? You do.

This means you might be playing quite a few characters in a given episode. That's okay - it can be a great deal of fun. Think about the diversity: you might be playing a crazy old coot in

one scene and a buffed-out warrior in the next or perhaps both of them... in the same scene.

Master of Refereeing

Games are meant to be fun, and Cartoon Action Hour is no exception. There are a zillion things the players could be doing instead of sitting around a table pretending to be someone else. That's why you must make sure that a good time is had by all.

This means keeping things on track when trouble pops up. If the players spiral into an argument, it's up to you to defuse the situation. If one of the players begins disrupting the game by telling jokes or long-winded stories about gaming sessions of days gone by, you're the one who gets to straighten her out. If a player starts bickering needlessly about the rules, you get to settle the issue.

Master of the Rules

It's your responsibility to know the rules of the game. You can discard or modify the rules as you see fit, but you are the one who makes any and all judgments on the rules. Besides, becoming familiar with all the rules will speed the game up immeasurably, as you won't need to constantly refer to the rulebook during the game.

BASIC GM SKILLS

You'll develop certain skills and abilities as you run more and more games. To help you along, we'll discuss some of the areas you might want to concentrate on. Don't let yourself feel overwhelmed by these. To be honest, your skills will improve over time. The more you run games, the better you'll become.

Description

As the GM, your aim is to give the players a solid idea of what their characters' surroundings are like. There is a delicate balance to preserve in doing this. On one hand, you don't want to skimp on the details - this will simply strip away the images in the players' imaginations, making the game world

a colorless, generic place. On the other hand, you don't want to drown the players with your descriptions – if the players really want to know exactly how many buttons are on an NPC's jacket, then, they can ask you.

Give them enough detail to make the setting interesting, but not so much that the game bogs down. In general, give detailed descriptions of things that will either add to the atmosphere or have some importance to the story. You can mention the rest briefly.

Below are three examples.

Example 1: *"You enter Lord Margoth's castle. It has gray walls and there's a big door on the opposite wall. Suddenly a sense of foreboding and dread washes over you."*

While the above example adequately tells you what your character sees, it lacks excitement, drama, or pizzazz. It works, but it's definitely a no-frills approach. Let's try again, shall we?

Example 2: *"You push open the large wooden door, using the slate gray stone handle, and enter Lord Margoth's castle. The first thing you see is a long staircase covered with a regal red carpet made of crushed velvet. On the wall is a morbid coat-of-arms with six skulls, a set of crossed swords, and a green and brown snake. The ceiling of the room is roughly twenty feet from the floor and has a chandelier made of bone. Across the room is an ornate metal door with a gargoyle-themed handle. On the floor, you see..."*

Wow! The GM in the above example was going overboard with describing every single detail. This isn't necessary. When the GM drones on, it can have the not-so-positive effect of boring the players. Let's have one more whack at it.

Example 3: *"As you open the heavy wooden door, a musty odor hits your nose. You step inside Lord Margoth's castle and immediately take notice of the long staircase leading to the upper sections of the structure. Morbid trappings, like a chandelier made of bone, fill the room, and you see an ornate metal door on the opposite wall."*

See? The above example provided a good atmosphere while giving the players a decent amount of information about their surroundings. The players quickly get a sense of their surroundings, yet they weren't bombarded with an abundance of useless information. This is what describing a scene is all about... implanting images in the players' minds without having to spend an hour to do so.

Improvisation

The art of improvisation is crucial in Game Mastering. No matter how well planned your episode is, the players will invariably come up with something you never thought of.

And there's nothing wrong with that – it keeps you on your toes. Besides, if the players never did anything unpredictable, much of the challenge would dissipate for you. It can be quite fun to keep the game going while improvising wildly.

One important thing to remember is that you should avoid letting the game get too far off-track when improvising. Concoct some way to bring the action back in line with the plot. That said, you shouldn't railroad the players into moving along a perfectly linear plot-path. Doing so will give the players the feeling of having no control. Give them plenty of choices, while still maintaining the point of the episode.

It's a fine line to walk, but it's not nearly as difficult as it may at first seem.

Fudging

Yes, gang, this means cheating. Not the malicious variety of cheating, though. Let me explain.


Many GMs will ignore the actual die rolls during the game if it makes for a better story. If a player flubs a crucial roll at the climax of the episode and the story would be more interesting had the character succeeded, then by all means devise a way for her to succeed. It's not really cheating if it makes for a better tale.

Don't let the players know you're fudging, though. Let them believe they succeeded on their own. It doesn't harm anyone, so just keep it your own little secret. To fudge successfully, it's a good idea for you to utilize a "GM screen." Anything will work for this - a folder, a cereal box, or an upturned open book. As long as it blocks the players' view of your die rolls, you're good to go.

Many GMs dislike the idea of fudging. No problem. If it doesn't seem right to you, go right ahead and stick exclusively to the rules.



Kargorr Sez:
The Game Master should fudge every chance she gets! That's right! If those too-big-for-their-britches heroes start to get ahead, fudge for the villains! If the villains start to get ahead, keep on fudging for the villains; you're on the right track!



Bravesteel Sez:
Don't listen to Kargorr. Fudging should be used as a tool for keeping the game exciting, not to give one side or the other a big advantage. And that, my friends, is a fact!

Pacing

Pacing is the art of keeping the game moving at an appropriate speed. If you're running an edge-of-your-seat chase sequence, keep the action fast and furious. Don't bog the game down with a heap of details. Talk fast and don't give the players a whole lot of time to think.

On the other hand, if you're running a melodramatic scene where two best friends must part ways forever, don't zip through it at a break-neck speed. Allow the players to savor the moment and perhaps feel the emotion from the scene.

Think about the scene you're doing and pace it accordingly.

EMBRACING THE GENRE

The retro-toon genre may be extremely wide open in terms of possibilities, but it has plenty of distinguishing characteristics that separate it from other genres. Many of these characteristics are discussed in depth below.

Cartoon Logic

Logic in the retro-toons was drastically different than the logic in our own, more mundane, world. You'll need to throw real world logic out the window when running *Cartoon Action Hour*, as it has no place in the game.

A hero leaping from the top of one airship to another goes against everything we know about physics, but in the retro-toons, it happened on a regular basis. Ditto: for pulling the rug out from under the bad guy's feet, sending her flying through the air and onto her butt, or one hero dispatching a horde of Goons.

The point is, cartoon logic is far more dramatic than real world logic and thus should be used whenever possible. If a player devises a creative but implausible maneuver or plan, by all means let her give it a try.

There are limits to this, obviously. A paramilitary commando shouldn't be allowed to pick up the earth and move it out of the way of an incoming

CARTOON LOGIC EXAMPLES

Some of these have already been mentioned in the main text and some are even enforced by the game rules. They are included here for the sake of completeness.

- When a flying vehicle explodes, there is always a parachute or escape pod employed.
- Guns may look like real guns, but they always shoot lasers. Bullets don't seem to exist in the world of the retro-toons.
- Bladed weapons are everywhere, but they never actually cut anyone.
- Fire usually just makes characters turn black with soot. Burns never appear. In fact, fire is usually more of an implied threat than something that actually hurts characters.
- Quicksand (or something similar) is common, even though no one seems to die from it. Instead, they are rescued or sucked into an underground land.
- When a character is violently flung around and lands hard on the ground (or into a wall), it always makes an exaggeratedly funny "bounce" or "thump" kind of sound, accompanied by the "camera" shaking to maximize the effect of the impact.
- Master villains are inexplicably inclined to rattle off their plans to captured heroes, thinking them to no longer be a danger.
- Characters leaping from one airship to another.
- One hero can take on an entire group of goons.
- Rugs are unceremoniously yanked out from under characters, sending them hurling through the air.
- Heroes can temporarily disorient a villain by cramming a garbage can (or whatever) over her head and upper torso. This is usually accompanied by the villain bellowing, "Who turned the lights out?"
- Huge guns don't deal as much damage to characters as they do to vehicles and structures. This is because they always seem to fail to score a direct hit on characters, resulting in a near hit. The impact from the nearby explosion sends the character into a hard object.
- Sentient beings cannot die, but non-sentient robots can be blown to smithereens with wild abandon. This is why robots were so common in the retro-toons.
- Noggin knockers (wherein a hero slams two villains' heads together) are common and effective attacks.
- Gargantuan monsters with gaping maws can be stymied (at least for a moment) by jamming a large stick in its mouth, wedging it open and preventing it from chomping down.
- When a gunfight breaks out, almost every shot misses... even when thousands of guns are being fired.
- Men seldom (if ever) strike women in a direct manner. If you watch the old cartoons, you'll notice that men hardly ever cause actual harm to the female characters, especially by a melee attack. In fact, whenever possible, men fought men and women fought women... and when it wasn't possible, men put on the "kid gloves" when dealing with them.

asteroid, no matter how cool it may seem. A superhero, on the other hand, may be able to pull that off. It's simply an issue of you, the GM, making a judgment call about how far is too far and then sticking to it.

Cheese and How to Use It

Hey, we all love the retro-toons, but there's no way to deny that they were laden with cheese. Certain series were lighter on it than others, but it was present in nearly every one of them. At first, this may sound like an insult to the genre, though that's not the case at all. The cheesiness is a big part of the appeal! It's one of the factors that set these brilliant shows apart from those that came later.

Since we have established the fact that the retro-toons were full of cheese, let's also establish the fact that cheese can be used to add flavor to your games of *Cartoon Action Hour* (pun most likely intended!). As the Game Master, you can have great fun by adding cheesy elements. Here are some ways to do exactly that.

Mention the Animation

Since you're essentially playing out episodes from a fictitious cartoon series, you can describe the animation. This reinforces the fact that this isn't just another RPG; this is an RPG about the retro-toons. Plus, it can help immerse the players in the genre. A few examples of this are as follows:

- If there's a trap door in the PCs' immediate area, mention that it is of a slightly different coloration than the surrounding terrain. This reflects the fact that the artists who drew the backgrounds were different than those who drew the "moving parts" of the scene. The moving parts were usually a little bit brighter. While this tips the players off that there's a trap door nearby, it all works out because it adds spice to the scene. Besides, some players are so "into" the genre that they'll instantly have their characters step right onto the trap door in question, just like the characters always seem to do in the retro-toons. This has actually happened on numerous occasions.
- The above actually goes for secret doors or even areas of a wall where a creature is going to burst through.
- For some reason, the animation for walking characters often looked stiff. So don't fail to describe it that way... or better yet, imitate it!
- If the characters are using firearms, you can bet that they are emitting laser blasts, even if the guns are supposed to be machine guns or shotguns. Since this is the case, why not bring that up?
- The retro-toons were notorious for using stock footage. The most prominent example is a certain blonde-haired hero who transformed from a wimpy prince to a brave muscle man by using a

magical sword. His cat changed too, if you still aren't sure whom we're referencing. You can use it too, by mentioning that a particular scene or background is stock footage. Using it repeatedly throughout the series can be quite fun.

Have a Blast with Sound Effects

Before running *Cartoon Action Hour*, you should consider watching some retro-toons while paying close attention to the sound effects. You'll find that some of these sound effects were used over and over again, even in different series. You can either record them or just imitate them during the game. Either method will suffice. If you use a particular laser gun sound for every laser used in the series, then you're establishing an offbeat kind of continuity.

Use Corny Dialogue

Don't be afraid to insert clichéd dialogue and bad puns. In the same vein, don't be afraid to spout it off in a manner that would make high quality voice actors cringe. Not all of the voice actors were good at their jobs, so it can be a hoot to mimic that aspect of things.

After-Show Messages

Many of the retro-toons were formatted so that each episode concluded with a 30-second vignette. The contents of these vignettes varied from series to series, though they typically fell into one of two types:

Safety Tips: Safety tip segments typically featured kids doing something dangerous until one or two heroes inevitably came along and set them straight. Knowing is, as they say, half the battle.

Moral of the Story: Moral of the Story segments tied directly into one or more of the events that transpired during the episode. It usually consisted of one of the heroes pointing out what the often heavy-handed moral was ("Truth is always the best option").



PCs actually gain an Experience Point for taking part in the After-Show Message, as per the rules on page XX.

Running the After-Show Message

As GM, your job is a simple one in this case – set the scene and let the PCs do the rest. If you're going for a Safety Tip, describe what the kids are doing and then tell the volunteering player(s) that their heroes see this going on. If you're aiming for a Moral of the Story bit, tell the participating player what the moral is and allow her to run with it by means of narration.

Be aware, however, that few players are likely to play it straight. Brace yourself for some major wackiness, including some off color humor. While that may not be authentic to the After-Show Messages from the retro-toons, it'll probably end the game with a big laugh from all the players, which is always a good thing. Besides, it's always fun to watch the players exercise their wit and satirical abilities.

Multiple PCs

Not every retro-toon focused on a small cast of primary heroes; quite the contrary. Some of them had large casts with rotating focuses. For example, one episode may concentrate on two or three heroes, while the next one might concentrate on another batch entirely.

Obviously, if each player has but one character, this style of cartoon is going to be impossible to recreate. The solution is actually simpler than one might think. You could instruct the players to create more than one PC apiece so that you can alternate them accordingly from episode to episode.

The major advantage in this approach is variety. With so many heroes to work with, you'll never run out of story ideas for them. It keeps things fresh and also prevents players from becoming bored with the series.

The disadvantage is that the individual PCs won't gain as much experience, thus slowing down the advancement rate. Really, this disadvantage is a disadvantage only to the players. In a way, though, it's not really a disadvantage to the overall series, because it regulates advancement, keeping power bloat from occurring.

30-Minute Episodes

It is entirely possible to run 30-minute episodes. Hey, why not? The retro-toon writers had roughly the same amount of time to tell a story, so there's no reason why you can't pull it off. Sure, the stories are going to be less intricate than they might ordinarily be, but there's a certain charm to these fast-paced, straightforward episodes.

If you don't feel comfortable with 30-minute episodes, try bumping them up to 45 minutes or even an hour.



These lengths are still brief enough for you to get the right feel.

When running shorter episodes, you should consider utilizing scene-based combat for all but major showdowns. This alone will speed things up exponentially, giving you more time for non-combat sequences.

Saturday Morning Line-Ups

Running abbreviated episodes opens up a uniquely fun opportunity – the chance to play out a whole morning's worth of series. By that, we mean that you can develop a handful of series and during your session run an episode of each one, back to back. This can create extra work for you as well as the players, but it's remarkably rewarding.

The Movie

Over the years, numerous series have hatched one or more animated movies. These movies generally boasted a more grandiose story, a darker tone, better animation, and lots of changes to the series from that point on.

Death may not have been a part of the retro-toons, but when a cartoon series spawned its own cartoon movie, all bets were off! Even during these movies, though, death didn't come cheap. It was always a pivotal moment, chock-full of drama and sentiment.

Also, the movies' plots were set on a larger scale. The scope and the stakes were almost always magnified.

Making The Movie Work

Design the story as a movie. In other words, make the plot self-contained and make it grandiose in comparison to other storylines you've run for the series up to that point.

Pull out all the stops! Bring out the best bad guys! Do something unexpected! And, yes, allow death. But only when dramatically appropriate.

Playing out a movie is also a good excuse for changes in character attitudes, outlooks, or even physical form. Someone who's really tired of her character can even use the movie as a nice dramatic way to remove their character from the game and start anew (and remember, if they later decide they liked their old character better, cartoon heroes have a hard time staying dead for long).

What follows is a list of suggested rules for you to use:

- Whenever a character gains her 4th Setback token, she must make an opposed check using her Stamina versus the attack Trait's rating. Failure means that you can opt to kill her off. In all fairness, you should at least allow the character to hover at death's door long enough to say a few last words, hopefully something melodramatic and poignant.
- All PCs begin the movie with two additional base Oomph. This can push the number to higher than the normal limit of 5. The movie should be where all the coolest stuff happens and that begins with the PCs having more cinematic leeway.
- Characters receive 2 to 3 Experience Points (your call) instead of just 1 for participating in the movie.
- After the movie, characters that played a role in it may immediately advance. Treat it as if it were the end of a season.

The Star of the Show

It was commonplace for the retro-toons to have one hero that acted as the star of the show while the other heroes played second fiddle to her. Sometimes, the star character was really no more powerful than the others, but the stories revolved around her. Other times, however, the star was clearly superior to her comrades. The amount by which she was more powerful varied from series to series, ranging from slightly more capable to so

much more potent that there was hardly a reason for the other heroes to exist.

When a show did have a star hero, the series itself was typically named after him in full ("The Adventures of Justarr") or in part ("Steel Man and the Protectors of the Galaxy").

The "star" concept works better for a cartoon than it does for a role-playing game. After all, few players want to play second banana to a fellow player's hero. This can quite easily spoil the fun for the players. However, some playing groups may have no problem playing sidekicks, finding it more of a challenge.

In any event, it puts your Game Mastering skills to the test, because it's your job to provide all the heroes with balanced challenges... and something that may be a challenge for the second-string heroes may be a cakewalk for the main protagonist. One way to do this is to have two types of villains: ones that can go toe-to-toe with the lesser heroes and ones that can duke it out with the star. And do your best to discourage the main hero from polishing off the other heroes' villains for them. Such behavior is bad form and directly goes against the spirit of the cartoons.

If you want the star hero to be slightly tougher than the others, allow the character an extra 2-4 PoPPs to build it with. If you're after a star that is moderately more proficient than the co-stars, add 5- 10 PoPPs. If you're aiming to make the star vastly more powerful, hand out an extra 11-20 PoPPs.



Cut Scenes

The "camera" doesn't need to be focused on the heroes all the time. In fact, the retro-toons often used a spiffy little method of showing what's going on elsewhere called *cut scenes*. Cut scenes can be a great asset to you when running *Cartoon Action Hour*.

A cut scene is simply a scene that takes place solely with NPCs. The players get to see what happens, but it's important to stress to them that their characters don't and therefore they cannot act upon it. It's just a narrative device that can make things more entertaining and retro-toon-a-rific.

The most common use of cut scenes is when the retro-toons would show the bad guys doing bad guy things. Perhaps the Master Villain is shown bawling out his underlings for their failure. Or maybe a couple of henchmen are depicted carrying out an important part of the Master Villain's most recent evil scheme.

Of course, not all cut scenes have to revolve around villains. You can employ them for almost any purpose, which often entails centering upon the PCs' allies or even completely neutral parties.

Putting Cut Scenes to Use

To carry out a cut scene, you must play the roles of all the characters participating in it. This may feel a bit awkward at first, but don't give up. It comes easier in time.

In addition to adding entertainment for the players, cut scenes prove useful in another way as well. They can be utilized to help show the passage of time. By moving away from the main scene to a cut scene and then back

again, you can dictate that a certain amount of time has passed.

EXAMPLE: *The PCs are involved in a scene in which they are receiving their mission that will involve traveling to a far-away land. Once the scene wraps up, the GM goes to a cut scene that involves the villains. After that, he cuts back to the PCs, who have now just arrived at the aforementioned "far-away land".*

One last thing to remember is that cut scenes should be kept short and to-the-point. The players are there to get involved in the action, not to watch you perform a one-person stage show.

