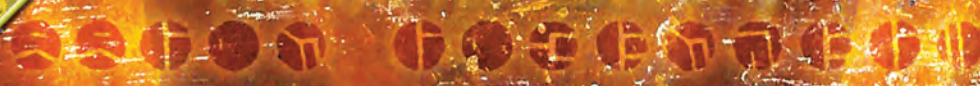


# GAMEMASTERING SECRET ENIGMAS

2ND EDITION



Aaron Rosenberg



# GAMEMASTERING SECRETS

In *Gamemastering Secrets*, **Aaron Rosenberg** and guest contributors cover everything about running a roleplaying game, from choosing a game system to closing out a long-running campaign. They give tips on how to handle various situations, pointers on potential dangers and how to avoid them, and advice on how to get the best gaming experience for everyone involved.

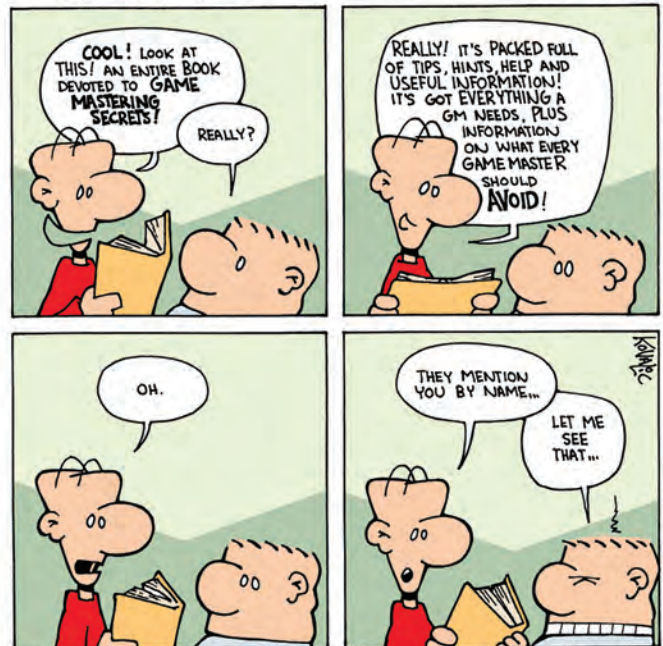
If you've never GM'd before, they teach you how to go about it, where to start and how to proceed, and enough tricks to convince anyone that you're a veteran.

If you are an experienced Gamemaster, they give you new tricks, ways to keep your players on their toes, and ways to spice up your games.

For use with any roleplaying game (examples are drawn from the *d20* and *Fudge* systems).

## DORK TOWER

BY JOHN KOVALIC



©2002 Shetland Productions john@kovalic.com <http://www.dorktower.com>

Featuring John Kovalic's *Dork Tower* comic strips and

Sam Chupp: *Gamemastering for Kids*

Hilary Doda: *Women at the Gaming Table*

Ann Dupuis: *The Science and Art of Mapmaking*

Lee Gold: *NPCs: Not Paper Cutouts*

Matt Forbeck: *Running a Con Game*

Kenneth Hite: *The Joy of Research*

Larry D. Hols: *Throw 'em to the Wolves!*

Steven S. Long: *Genre and Setting Simulation*

Steven Marsh: *Treasure*

Frank Mentzer: *Trust at the Gaming Table*

John Nephew: *The Beginner's Game*

John R. Phythyon, Jr.: *Creating Memorable Villains*

Jean Rabe: *Winging It*

Mark Simmons: *Gamemaster's Flowhart 101*

Lester Smith: *Campaign Troubleshooting*

James M. Ward: *Campaign World-building*

Ross Winn: *Character Creation*

[www.gmsecrets.com](http://www.gmsecrets.com)

**Fudge**  
SYSTEM™

**d20**  
system™

ISBN 1-887154-11-6



9 781887 154116



**Grey Ghost  
Press, Inc.**



# GAMEMASTERING SECRETS™



**2nd Edition**  
by **Aaron Rosenberg**



with guest contributors:

**Sam Chupp**

**Hilary Doda**

**Ann Dupuis**

**Lee Gold**

**Matthew Forbeck**

**Kenneth Hite**

**Larry D. Hols**

**Steven S. Long**

**Steven Marsh**

**Frank Mentzer**

**John Nephew**

**John R. Phythyon, Jr.**

**Jean Rabe**

**Mark Simmons**

**Lester Smith**

**James M. Ward**

**Ross Winn**

and featuring the *Dork Tower* comics by **John Kovalic**

Cover by **Daniel M. Davis**

Edited by **Janice Sellers**

Page Layout and Typography by **Mark Arsenault** ([www.goldenpillarpublishing.com](http://www.goldenpillarpublishing.com))



**Grey Ghost  
Press, Inc.**

Published by Grey Ghost Press, Inc.  
Randolph, Massachusetts, USA

<http://www.gmsecrets.com>

# LEGAL STUFF

## Copyrights

*Gamemastering Secrets 2nd Edition* Copyright ©2002 by Grey Ghost Press, Inc.

*The Beginner's Game* Copyright ©1995 by John Nephew

*Campaign Troubleshooting* Copyright ©2002 by Lester Smith, released as Open Game Content under the Open Game License (see pp. 4-5).

*Campaign World-building* Copyright ©2002 by James M. Ward, released as Open Game Content under the Open Game License (see pp. 4-5).

*Character Creation* Copyright ©2002 by Ross Winn  
*Creating Memorable Villains for Your Campaigns* Copyright ©2002 by John R. Phythyon, Jr.

*Gamemaster's Flowchart 101* Copyright ©2002 by Mark Simmons

*Gamemastering for Kids* Copyright ©2002 by Sam Chupp, released as Open Game Content under the Open Game License (see pp. 4-5).

*Genre and Setting Simulation* Copyright ©2002 by Steven S. Long, released as Open Game Content under the Open Game License (see pp. 4-5).

*Harems and Harpies: Women at the Gaming Table* Copyright ©2002 by Hilary Doda, released as Open Game Content under the Open Game License (see pp. 4-5).

*Here Be Dragons: The Science and Art of Map Making* Copyright ©2002 by Ann Dupuis, released as Open Game Content under the Open Game License (see pp. 4-5).

*The Joy of Research* Copyright ©2002 by Kenneth Hite, released as Open Game Content under the Open Game License (see pp. 4-5)

*NPCs—Not Paper Cutouts* Copyright ©2002 by Lee Gold, editor of Alarums and Excursions: see <http://theStarport.com/xeno/aande.html>, released as Open Game Content under the Open Game License (see pp. 4-5)

*Running a Con Game* Copyright ©2002 by Matthew Forbeck

*Throw 'em to the wolves!* Copyright ©2002 by Larry D. Hols, re-

leased as Open Game Content under the Open Game License (see pp. 4-5).

*Trust at the Gaming Table* Copyright ©2002 by J. Franklin Mentzer

*Winging It* Copyright ©2002 by Jean Rabe, released as Open Game Content under the Open Game License (see pp. 4-5).

*Dork Tower* comic strips are copyrighted by Shetland Productions as indicated.

## Trademarks

*Gamemastering Secrets* is a trademark owned by Grey Ghost Press, Inc.

The *Fudge System* logo is a trademark of Steffan O'Sullivan, used under license.

'd20 System' and the 'd20 System' logo are Trademarks owned by Wizards of the Coast and are used according to the terms of the d20 System License version 3.0. A copy of this License can be found at [www.wizards.com](http://www.wizards.com).

Any other product or company names mentioned or referenced herein are the trademarks of their respective owners, and no challenges to the trademarks or copyrights concerned are intended.

## About Fudge

*Fudge* is a role-playing game written by Steffan O'Sullivan, with extensive input from the Usenet community of [rec.games.design](http://rec.games.design). The basic rules of *Fudge* are available on the internet at <http://www.fudgerpg.com> and in book form from Grey Ghost Games, P.O. Box



838, Randolph, MA 02368. They may be used with any gaming genre. While an individual work derived from *Fudge* may specify certain attributes and skills, many more are possible with *Fudge*. Every Game Master using *Fudge* is encouraged to add or ignore any character traits. Anyone who wishes to distribute such material for free may do so; merely include this ABOUT FUDGE notice and disclaimer (complete with *Fudge* copyright notice). If you wish to charge a fee for such material, other than as an article in a magazine or other periodical, you must first obtain a royalty-free license from the author of *Fudge*, Steffan O'Sullivan, P.O. Box 465, Plymouth, NH 03264.

## Disclaimer

The following materials based on *Fudge*, entitled *Gamemastering Secrets 2nd Edition*, are created by, made available by, and Copyright © 2002 by Grey Ghost Press, Inc., and are not necessarily endorsed in any way by Steffan O'Sullivan or any publisher of other *Fudge* materials. Neither Steffan O'Sullivan nor any publisher of other *Fudge* materials is in any way responsible for the materials unless specifically credited. Original *Fudge* materials Copyright © 1992-1995 by Steffan O'Sullivan, All Rights Reserved.

## About the Open Game License and d20 System® License

This product is being published under version 1.0a of the Open Game License (see pp. 4-5) and version 3.0 of the d20 System® License.



## Designation of Open Game Content

The following portions of *Gamemastering Secrets 2nd Edition* are designated as “Open Game Content” and may be used and modified by others as allowed under the Open Game License, provided proper attribution and copyright notices are included:

*Campaign Troubleshooting* Copyright ©2002 by Lester Smith.

*Campaign World-building* Copyright ©2002 by James M. Ward.

*Gamemastering for Kids* Copyright ©2002 by Sam Chupp.

*Genre and Setting Simulation* Copyright ©2002 by Steven S. Long.

*Harems and Harpies: Women at the Gaming Table* Copyright ©2002 by Hilary Doda.

*Here Be Dragons: The Science and Art of Map Making* Copyright ©2002 by Ann Dupuis (excluding graphics, maps, and illustrations).

*The Joy of Research* Copyright ©2002 by Kenneth Hite.

*NPCs—Not Paper Cutouts* Copyright ©2002 by Lee Gold, editor of *Alarums and Excursions*: see <http://theStarport.com/xeno/aande.html>.

*Throw 'em to the wolves!* Copyright ©2002 by Larry D. Hols.

*Winging It* Copyright ©2002 by Jean Rabe.

Open Game Content in *Gamemastering Secrets 2nd Edition* is further designated on page 67.

## Designation of Product Identity

All textual material not specifically designated as “Open Game Content” (see above) is hereby designated as “Product Identity,” as provided in section 1(e) of the Open Game License. All such Product Identity is covered under copyrights and cannot be used without express permission of the copyright holder. All graphics, illustrations, maps, and other graphic elements are also Product Identity, protected under copyright law.

# OPEN GAME LICENSE VERSION 1.0A

The following text is the property of Wizards of the Coast, Inc. and is Copyright 2000 Wizards of the Coast, Inc (“Wizards”). All Rights Reserved.

**1. Definitions:** (a) “Contributors” means the copyright and/or trademark owners who have contributed Open Game Content; (b) “Derivative Material” means copyrighted material including derivative works and translations (including into other computer languages), potation, modification, correction, addition, extension, upgrade, improvement, compilation, abridgment or other form in which an existing work may be recast, transformed or adapted; (c) “Distribute” means to reproduce, license, rent, lease, sell, broadcast, publicly display, transmit or otherwise distribute; (d) “Open Game Content” means the game mechanic and includes the methods, procedures, processes and routines to the extent such content does not embody the Product Identity and is an enhancement over the prior art and any additional content clearly identified as Open Game Content by the Contributor, and means any work covered by this License, including translations and derivative works under copyright law, but specifically excludes Product Identity. (e) “Product Identity” means product and product line names, logos and identifying marks including trade dress; artifacts; creatures characters; stories, storylines, plots, thematic elements, dialogue, incidents, language, artwork, symbols, designs, depictions, likenesses, formats, poses, concepts, themes and graphic, photographic and other visual or audio representations; names and descriptions of characters, spells, enchantments, personalities, teams, personas, likenesses and special abilities; places, locations, environments, creatures, equipment, magical or supernatural abilities or effects, logos, symbols, or graphic designs; and any other trademark or registered trademark clearly identified as Product identity by the owner of the Product Identity, and which specifically excludes the Open Game Content; (f) “Trademark” means the logos, names, mark, sign, motto, designs that are used by a Contributor to identify itself or its products or the associated products contributed to the Open Game License by the Contributor (g) “Use”, “Used” or “Using” means to use, Distribute, copy, edit, format, modify, translate and otherwise create Derivative Material of Open Game Content. (h) “You” or “Your” means the licensee in terms of this agreement.

**2. The License:** This License applies to any Open Game Content that contains a notice indicating that the Open Game Content may only be Used under and in terms of this License. You must affix such a notice to any Open Game Content that you Use. No terms may be added to or subtracted from this License except as described by the License itself. No other terms or conditions may be applied to any Open Game Content distributed using this License.

**3. Offer and Acceptance:** By Using the Open Game Content You indicate Your acceptance of the terms of this License.

**4. Grant and Consideration:** In consideration for agreeing to use this License, the Contributors grant You a perpetual, worldwide, royalty-free, non-exclusive license with the exact terms of this License to Use, the Open Game Content.

**5. Representation of Authority to Contribute:** If You are contributing original material as Open Game Content, You represent that Your Contributions are Your original creation and/or You have sufficient rights to grant the rights conveyed by this License.

**6. Notice of License Copyright:** You must update the COPYRIGHT NOTICE portion of this License to include the exact text of the COPYRIGHT NOTICE of any Open Game Content You are copying, modifying or distributing, and You must add the title, the copyright date, and the copyright holder’s name to the COPYRIGHT NOTICE of any original Open Game Content you Distribute.

**7. Use of Product Identity:** You agree not to Use any Product Identity, including as an indication as to compatibility, except as expressly licensed in another, independent Agreement with the owner of each element of that Product Identity. You agree not to indicate compatibility or co-adaptability with any Trademark or Registered Trademark in conjunction with a work containing Open Game Content except as expressly licensed in another, independent Agreement with the owner of such Trademark or Registered Trademark. The use of any Product Identity in Open Game Content does not constitute a challenge to the ownership of that Prod-

# OPEN GAME LICENSE VERSION 1.0

uct Identity. The owner of any Product Identity used in Open Game Content shall retain all rights, title and interest in and to that Product Identity.

**8. Identification:** If you distribute Open Game Content You must clearly indicate which portions of the work that you are distributing are Open Game Content.

**9. Updating the License:** Wizards or its designated Agents may publish updated versions of this License. You may use any authorized version of this License to copy, modify and distribute any Open Game Content originally distributed under any version of this License.

**10 Copy of this License:** You MUST include a copy of this License with every copy of the Open Game Content You Distribute.

**11. Use of Contributor Credits:** You may not market or advertise the Open Game Content using the name of any Contributor unless You have written permission from the Contributor to do so.

**12 Inability to Comply:** If it is impossible for You to comply with any of the terms of this License with respect to some or all of the Open Game Content due to statute, judicial order, or governmental regulation then You may not Use any Open Game Material so affected.

**13 Termination:** This License will terminate automatically if You fail to comply with all terms herein and fail to cure such breach within 30 days of becoming aware of the breach. All sublicenses shall survive the termination of this License.

**14 Reformation:** If any provision of this License is held to be unenforceable, such provision shall be reformed only to the extent necessary to make it enforceable.

## 15 COPYRIGHT NOTICE

*Open Game License v 1.0* Copyright 2000, Wizards of the Coast, Inc.

*System Reference Document* Copyright 2000, Wizards of the Coast, Inc.; Authors Jonathan Tweet, Monte Cook, Skip Williams, based on original material by E. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson.

*Campaign Troubleshooting* Copyright ©2002 by Lester Smith.

*Campaign World-building* Copyright ©2002 by James M. Ward.

*Gamemastering for Kids* Copyright ©2002 by Sam Chupp.

*Genre and Setting Simulation* Copyright ©2002 by Steven S. Long.

*Harems and Harpies: Women at the Gaming Table* Copyright ©2002 by Hilary Doda.

*Here Be Dragons: The Science and Art of Map Making* Copyright ©2002 by Ann Dupuis.

*The Joy of Research* Copyright ©2002 by Kenneth Hite.

*NPCs—Not Paper Cutouts* Copyright ©2002 by Lee Gold, editor of *Alarums and Excursions*: see <http://theStarport.com/xeno/aande.html>.

*Throw 'em to the wolves!* Copyright ©2002 by Larry D. Hols.

*Winging It* Copyright ©2002 by Jean Rabe.

# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b> .....	7	<b>Closing the Game</b> .....	64
<b>First-timers' Quick Tips</b> .....	8	Player Satisfaction .....	64
<b>Before the Game</b> .....	9	GM Satisfaction .....	64
Basic Terms .....	9	Leaving It Open .....	65
Genre .....	9	<b>Secrets of the Masters</b> .....	67
Choosing a Game System .....	11	<i>Genre and Setting Simulation</i>	
Reading the Book .....	12	by Steven S. Long .....	67
Changing the Rules .....	13	<i>The Joy of Research</i>	
When Rules Don't Apply .....	16	by Kenneth Hite .....	72
Selecting a Setting .....	19	<i>Creating Memorable Villains for Your Campaigns</i>	
Store-bought or Home-grown? .....	21	by John R. Phythyon, Jr. ....	77
Gathering Your Players .....	22	<i>Here Be Dragons: The Science and Art</i>	
Time and Place .....	23	of Map Making	
Designing an Adventure .....	24	by Ann Dupuis .....	82
Tailoring .....	26	<i>Campaign World-building</i>	
Bringing in New Gamers .....	27	by James M. Ward .....	100
<b>Starting the Game</b> .....	30	<i>Gamemaster's Flowchart 101</i>	
Assembling the Characters .....	30	by Mark Simmons .....	104
Setting the Tone .....	31	<i>Character Creation</i>	
Fostering Party Unity—without the PC Stamp	33	by Ross Winn .....	105
Authority—and Interaction .....	35	<i>Women at the Gaming Table</i>	
On with the adventure! .....	35	by Hilary Doda .....	108
<b>Running the Game</b> .....	37	<i>The Beginner's Game</i>	
Daily Prep .....	37	by John Nephew .....	114
Keeping Notes .....	37	<i>NPCs—Not Paper Cutouts</i>	
Narrative Styles .....	38	by Lee Gold .....	117
Dialogue and Dialect .....	39	<i>Winging It</i>	
Props .....	40	by Jean Rabe .....	122
Audial Aids .....	41	<i>Throw 'em to the wolves!</i>	
Hunger Pangs .....	43	by Larry D. Hols .....	127
Combat—Number versus Narrative .....	44	<i>Trust at the Gaming Table</i>	
Minutiae .....	45	by Frank Mentzer .....	129
Zombies and Ghosts .....	46	<i>Treasure</i>	
Watching Your Game .....	48	by Steven Marsh .....	134
Fudging Results .....	49	<i>Campaign Troubleshooting</i>	
Holding Them Together .....	50	by Lester Smith .....	142
Split Focus .....	51	<i>Running a Con Game</i>	
Asides .....	52	by Matthew Forbeck .....	145
Notes .....	54	<i>Gamemastering for Kids</i>	
Interests—Party versus Personal .....	54	by Sam Chupp .....	152
Power Levels .....	55	<b>Contributor Bios</b> .....	161
Experience .....	56	<b>Index</b> .....	166
Adding New Characters .....	58	<b>Advertising</b> .....	173
Modifying Characters .....	59	Grey Ghost Games .....	173
Killing Characters .....	60	Crazy 8 Press (Aaron Rosenberg) .....	174
Cheating? .....	62	Robin's Laws of Good Gamemastering .....	175
Taking People Out .....	63	Renegade Game Studios (John Kovalic) .....	176



# GAME MASTERING SECRETS

## INTRODUCTION

So you're a gamemaster.

Great!

Being a gamemaster (GM) is very exciting—you're at the heart of everything. You decide what game to play, where to set the story, what story to run, and what characters are involved—you set the stage for the adventure and handle the running of it. You are the default storyteller—when the characters are not actively taking control, you dictate events, and you handle all other characters. It's a heady feeling to know that you are in charge.

It's also a heavy responsibility. Players can just show up for the game, with their character sheets and their dice, and be ready to play. You have prep work to do—events to plan, areas to map, characters to create and develop. While each player only has to worry about his personal character, you have to keep an eye on everyone and everything—you are responsible for all of it, and you cannot let a single event slip by.

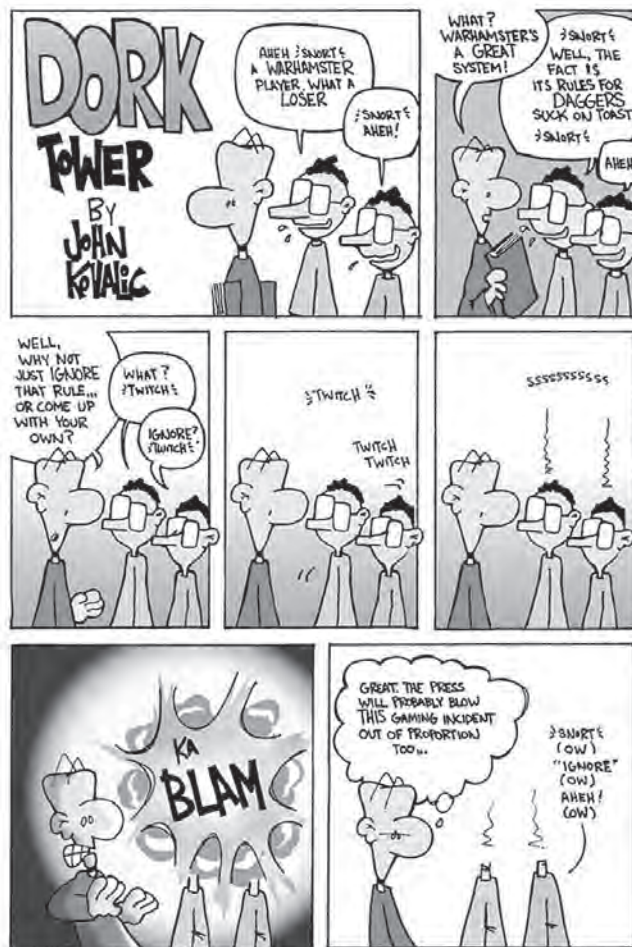
Feel like you need help? Well, you're in luck.

This book, *Gamemastering Secrets*, is all about GMing games. In it, my guest essayists and I will talk about every aspect of creating and running a game. We'll give you tips on how to handle situations, pointers on potential dangers and how to avoid them, and general information on how to get the best gaming experience for everyone involved. These are things you won't share with your players—they are trade secrets, after all—but they'll feel the effects, and they'll be amazed and thrilled at how well your games are run and how much fun you all have during the games. Some of the sections you'll only need to read once; others you'll probably refer back to on a regular basis, to refresh your memory and to answer any new questions you might have. Can we answer everything,

cover every situation? Probably not, but we will give you a solid base to work from. If you've never GMed before, we'll teach you how to go about it, where to start and how to proceed, and enough tricks to convince anyone that you're a veteran. If you are an experienced GM, we'll give you a few new tricks, ways to keep your players on their toes, and ways to spice up your games a bit.

Ready to learn a few secrets and improve your skills? Read on, and remember—it's all about the game.

—Aaron Rosenberg



### Gamemastering Secrets on the World Wide Web

Please visit our companion website, <http://www.gmsecrets.com>!

Explore links to websites with gamemastering advice, resources, and tools. Browse the "Gamemaster Bookshelves" for books and videos recommended by our contributors. Contribute your own gamemastering "secrets!"

# FIRST-TIMERS' QUICK TIPS

Okay, so you've never GMed before. What do you do? Well, you should read this book cover to cover, for starters. But here are a few quick tips to remember while running:

**1. You are God.** Being the GM means you're the boss—you can listen to arguments if you like, but once you say how something is, that's it. No more back talk.

**2. Never let them see you sweat.** The PCs go left instead of right, and you didn't have that corridor designed yet. They get a lucky break and eliminate a major villain—before he can put his plans into motion. Just adapt to what's happening and move in. Your players should never know they threw you for a loop.

**3. Don't coddle characters.** If a PC does something insanely stupid that should get him killed—let him get killed. You can soften things a little if you're squeamish, but never let a character walk away from something that should definitely have killed him, or the players will know they can get away with anything.

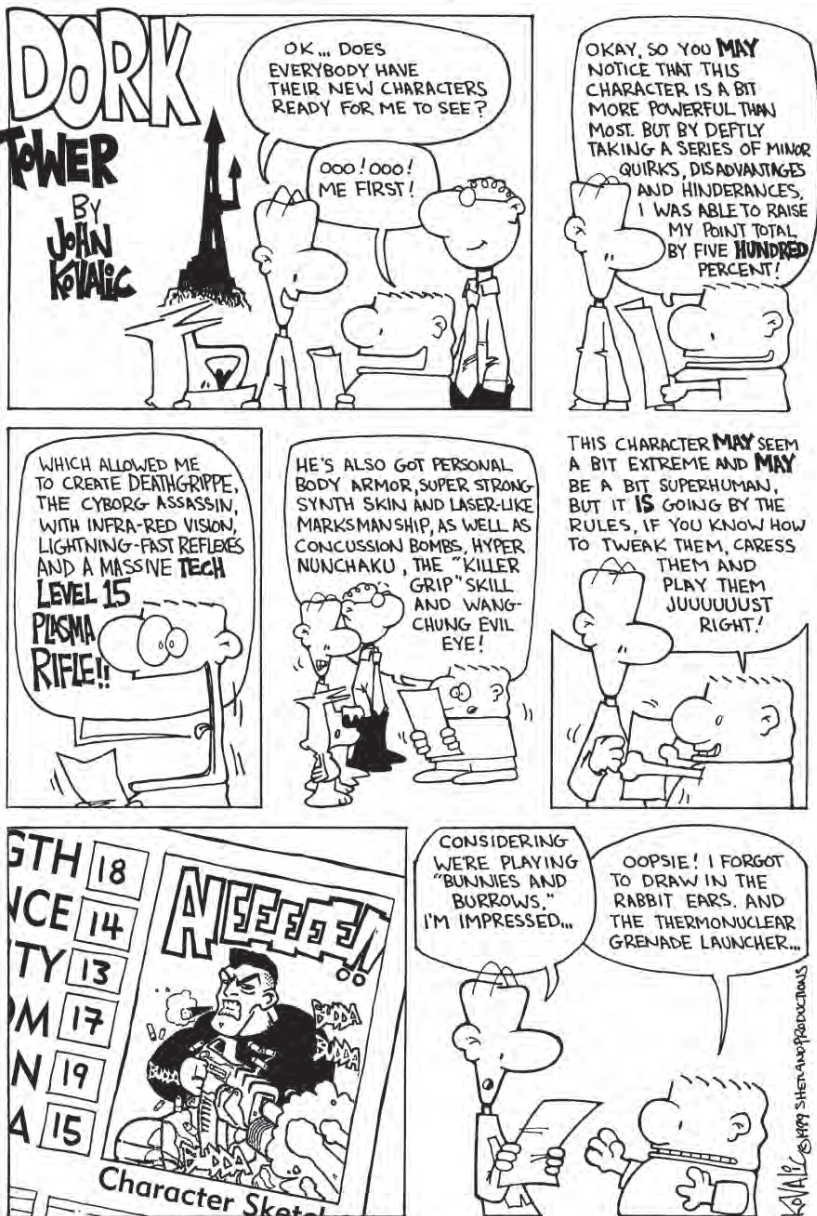
**4. It's the players' game, too.** Never force the characters to do something or offer them only the option you want them to take. Remember that RPG's are interactive and that it's you and the players—you have to let them make their own decisions and adapt to them.

**5. Be flexible.** If you've written up an entire three-page description of a city and while the game is going on you come up with something cooler, use the cooler version. If the players are getting bored with a dungeon and you still have ten pages of rooms left, ditch those pages and let them find an exit. The story should keep them involved, and you may have to adjust accordingly.

**6. NPCs are secondary.** It's good to develop your NPCs and to enjoy playing them, but don't let them take center stage. That's for the PCs. The player characters should be the most important people in the story.

**7. Center stage is not center of the universe.** Don't make everything in the world revolve around the PCs. Just because they're the main characters in your game doesn't mean they're the most important people in the world. If your game is about Secret Service agents, the President is far more important to the world, but the game itself should follow the agents, instead of just being a chance for you to play President.

**8. Have fun!** Remember that you chose to GM and that you enjoy telling stories and setting up events. Get into it. Enjoy your NPCs, your plot twists, and the way the PCs work through them (or don't). This is a game, after all.



# GAME MASTERING SECRETS

## BEFORE THE GAME

### Basic Terms

Before we get into things, let's go over a few terms, in case you're new to this. You are the gamemaster, or GM—that means you're the one running the game. The type of game we're talking about is a roleplaying game or RPG, also known as tabletop gaming or pen-and-paper gaming. That means it has a rules manual and that the GM and the players will sit around a table and play by describing situations and settings and by narrating their actions. People may speak “in character,” talking as their characters instead of simply saying what the characters would say, but beyond that, facial expressions, and a few small gestures, the game is all a matter of description and discussion. (Another role-playing game type is live action, where you actually walk around in character.) The players have their own characters, known as player characters or PCs; the GM runs the other characters, known as NPCs (nonplayer characters). NPCs can be both major and minor—the group's opponents are NPCs, but so are tavernkeepers, porters, taxi drivers, etc. Player knowledge is something the player knows but the character doesn't, while character knowledge is something the character knows. For example, the fact that your companion is a wizard is character knowledge, since your character saw him cast a spell, but the fact that he's a fifth-level illusionist is player knowledge, since there's no way the character would know what a level was.

Games are generally talked about as sessions, adventures, and campaigns. The adventure is the story you're running your group through—think of it as a movie or a novel. The campaign is the series of adventures for the group—a television series, or a series of related novels or movies. The session is a single play session. For example, you've developed a starting adventure for your group. You meet every Saturday to game and usually play for a few hours—these are your sessions. After the adventure finishes, the group decides that it wants to keep the same characters, and you

create a new adventure for them—this is the second adventure in your campaign.

We'll probably have more terms as we go, and we'll define any new ones, but these should get us started.

### Genre

Some people think the first thing you do upon deciding to run a game is create the adventure. Wrong! There are a dozen steps before that. First off, what genre are you going to run? That's going to influence which game you're playing, what the story constraints are, what character types are available—in short, everything. How do you decide among the genres? Well, let's look at some of our options:

**“Sometimes you can recreate a genre in a game with no difficulty. At other times a setting proves so unadaptable to RPG's that it's not worth the effort to try to carry it over to the gaming table.”**

— Steven S. Long, p. 67

### Fantasy

This is actually a broad category, but we'll start here for now. Magic. That's enough to distinguish it. Do you want magic in your game? Then you're going to do some variety of fantasy.

### Science Fiction

The opposite of fantasy, because it's all about science. Does that mean everyone has to play scientists? No. Does it mean your game will be dull and boring and very dry and academic? No. But it does mean that magic won't be an option—instead you (and your players) will have technology beyond that currently found in the real world.

### Horror

Horror is set in the real world, because the entire point is to have something unnatural and unfamiliar that strikes terror into the PCs. It's not fantasy, because if magic means anything is possible, that reduces the impact of the horror. The same is true with science fiction, since if you can create robots and new lifeforms and starships it's harder to have things that are unknowable and hence frightening. You can merge genres, of

course—the movie *Alien* is a perfect example of that, mixing science fiction and horror—but it’s a little harder to do.

## Espionage

The realm of spies and secret agents. Espionage is set in the real world, though it can be in a different era (spies in Napoleonic France, for example). Everything in this genre is believable—devices may be creative but they could exist, people may be well trained and talented but they are human, and opponents may be fiendish and clever but they are also human. Espionage is all about wits and physical prowess—you have to be able to outthink and outshoot your enemy to stay alive and accomplish your mission. Player characters are usually secret agents, either independents or working for an intelligence agency, and some sort of mission or plot is underway. The nice thing about espionage is that it gives a good game structure, since missions are clearly assigned and often have a defined time limit. It’s also a good way to get people into gaming, because there aren’t any “weird” things like aliens or wizards or monsters to deal with, just other people. The James Bond books and films are classic espionage.

## Sci-Fi & Fantasy Sub-genres

So what about science fiction and fantasy? Let’s break them down a bit more. Fantasy can be divided in two ways—high and low, modern and classic.

### High Fantasy

High fantasy is fantasy on an epic scale, with powerful wizards, imposing warriors, and enormous armies. High fantasy is always about conquest, destruction, and salvation on a grand level—people are heroic or villainous, but rarely in between. *Lord of the Rings*, *The Wheel of Time*, and *The Belgariad* are all high fantasy, and in each the fate of the world hangs in the balance.

### Low Fantasy

Low fantasy is about smaller characters and a smaller scale. It’s about everyday people and mundane problems—a village might be threatened, a family might be at risk, but not a kingdom or a world. Characters are usually more believable, more fallible, and with much

lower expectations—becoming a successful merchant, for example, instead of becoming a king. Joel Rosenberg’s *D’shai* books and Mary Brown’s *The Unlikely Ones* are excellent examples of low fantasy, about people who want to be happy and healthy and successful rather than people intent on ruling or saving a continent.

### Modern Fantasy

Modern fantasy is set in the modern-day world and mixes magic with cars, computers, cell phones, and cotton candy. Tim Powers novels are brilliant modern fantasies, as is Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere*. The point to modern fantasy is that the magic is made that much more amazing in contrast to everyday reality—you can identify with the characters and their surroundings, and so the introduction of magic catches you by surprise and creates a new sense of wonder.

### Classic Fantasy

Classic fantasy is set in a medieval-era world, whether an actual historical setting or an imaginary one. People ride horses and carriages instead of driving cars, there are no refrigerators or phones, long-distance communication is only by messenger or homing bird, guns either do not exist or are rare and a bit frightening, and most people bathe only once a month. The advantage of classic fantasy is that magic seems more believable here—it is the period associated with legends like Merlin and Camelot, the same feel as *Lord of the Rings*, and where there are knights and clerics wizards do not seem out of place.

You can have classic high fantasy, or modern low fantasy, or vice-versa.

Science fiction can also be divided into two sets of categories—near-future and futuristic, interstellar and space opera.

### Near-future Sci-Fi

Near-future science fiction is anywhere from tomorrow to twenty years forward—less than a generation away. That means most of the world is still the same—there have usually been one or two major discoveries/inventions/refinements which have reshaped society, but players can still recognize a great deal. The advantage

of this is that it is familiar, so the changes stand out more—if it's New York in 2010 and flying cars have just become widespread, that's going to be a noticeable change and something the players will focus on. *Darwin's Radio* by Greg Bear is a good example of near-future science fiction—it starts out modern-day and ends about ten years in the future.

### Futuristic Sci-Fi

Futuristic science fiction is at least a century in the future, so several generations have passed and everything has changed—the way people travel, the way they eat, how they dress, how they talk, careers, weapons, everything. Sometimes humanity itself has changed, evolving into something only barely recognizable. This creates a greater sense of wonder and gives you more freedom to alter things and introduce new elements, but it also makes it harder for the players to identify with their characters and with the setting. *Dune* is a classic example of futuristic science fiction, as is Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series.

Interstellar science fiction is a variant of futuristic, since it's always well in our future. The focus, however, is on traveling to other worlds and on the fact that humanity has expanded into the galaxy as a whole. It's not always a question of technological advancement—some interstellar settings are less advanced than more earthbound ones—as much as attitude and scope. In interstellar science fiction the possibility of going to another planet is very real, almost commonplace, and so most people don't content themselves with being on a single world for very long. Julian May's *Galactic Milieu* novels are excellent examples of this (interestingly enough, her previous novels, the *Intervention* series, are good examples of near-future science fiction and lead up to the *Galactic Milieu* books).

Space opera is a particular kind of interstellar science fiction. It concerns itself less with technology and more with a renewed sense of wonder—no one cares how the devices work, only that they allow for excitement and travel. Space opera is really fantasy, usually high classic fantasy, with science trappings—magic

swords disguised as laser weapons, flying carpets masked as FTL ships, and magic renamed as psionics. The point of space opera is always grand adventure and the characters are built on a heroic scale. *Star Wars* is the best example of space opera.

There are others, of course—time periods between medieval and modern, time travel, and a few others—but these are the basics. Which one do you want to run?

**“It's crucial to go with a genre you like, because then you'll be into it, and if you aren't psyched about it there's no way your players will be.”**

What sounds like fun to you—and what do you think you can come up with a story for? If you're using a prewritten adventure, which genre are you most familiar with? If you hate the idea of magic, you shouldn't do anything fantasy-related—you won't have the feel for it, and that'll make things awkward for everyone. On the other hand, if

you love scary movies and things that go bump in the night and the idea that not everything can be explained or control, you're looking for horror.

One great way to choose a genre is to think about books and movies you've liked. What have you really enjoyed? *Lord of the Rings*? Fantasy. *Blade Runner*? Science fiction. *The Shining*? Horror. It's crucial to go with a genre you like, because then you'll be into it, and if you aren't psyched about it there's no way your players will be.

## Choosing a Game System

Now that you have a genre, you have to pick a game. Which game will it be? Obviously, you want something that works with your selected genre. You have two options, ultimately—generic or genre-specific.

A generic system is one that's created to work with any genre. Take *Fudge*, for example. You can run any kind of game with it—fantasy, horror, science fiction, espionage, you name it. All you do is use the basic system and modify the details. The same is true of d20—the basic rules stay the same and you tailor the character classes, skills, feats, and equipment to suit. The plus of using a generic system is that, if you're already fa-

READING THE GAME

miliar with it, you don't have to learn a new system; it also may be easier to find other people familiar with it, so that you have a wider pool of potential players. The minus is that you're using a system meant to work with everything, and you will have to tailor it a bit to suit your specific needs.

A genre-specific system is one that's built for a particular game in a particular genre. *Deadlands*, for example, is a Wild West-horror game, and its system of cards, chips, and dice is well suited to that era and genre, but it probably won't work very well for classic fantasy or far-flung science fiction. That's one of the drawbacks of a genre-specific system—it doesn't translate well to other genres. The other drawback, of course, is that only people who like that genre will know it—if you decide to run an espionage game and want to use *Spookshow* to do it, you won't find as many people who know that system as you will people who know d20 or *Fudge*.

So what game should you use? Ultimately, there's only one answer for that—a game you're comfortable with. Look at your game collection first. Do you have any games you already know and like which fit the genre you want? If so, great—use those. If not, go to the store and browse. Look at games for that genre or at generic games. Ask your friends to recommend games in that genre. Find something you think sounds good. It doesn't matter if the game is perfect for the genre—if you don't like the game you won't do a good job running it.

Should you go generic or genre-specific? Again, this depends on what you know. If you're already familiar with a generic game

system and you like it, try that one—it's a lot easier and quicker to modify it than it would be to learn an entire new game. If you already know a genre-specific game for the right genre, you've probably already planned to use that game. Sometimes people decide the game first—"I want to run a *Vampire* game" or "I want to do a *Chosen* game"—in which case you've already made your choice for genre and game system at the same time. If you haven't selected a game system to start, just find one you can work with, one that feels reasonable to you and that you think suits the feel you want for your game.

**“There are also plenty of free games available on the Internet, which allow you to try a game before you spend any money.”**

— Sam Chupp, p. 154

## Reading the Book

Okay, here's a big tip—read the book! That sounds obvious, right? You'd be surprised how many people run a game (or play a game) without ever reading the game book. I don't mean skim through it, either. I mean sit down and read the thing cover to cover. Why? Because you never know where a bit of useful information might be hiding. For example, did you know that if you're using the d20 system you can use a weapon two-handed and get additional damage for it? Did you know that you can use two skills together to improve your chances of success? You did if you read the entire *Player's Handbook*, but neither bit of information is at the start of a chapter—you have to really read the book.

It's okay for players to just skim a book, and they often do—they'll read the intro, read the character creation, and read any



other bits that strike their fancy. They don't need to know the rest—because the GM does. That's part of your responsibility—you have to know the rules. Remember, you're the authority here—players will often read up on anything that can help them, but they won't bother with things beyond that, and you'll have to know the penalties because they won't (or if they do they might not bother to remind you about them). So be sure to read all of it, and make sure you understand it.

The other reason to read the entire book is because it will help you formulate your game. Often in reading a game, you'll find little bits of information that stick with you, and when you're working on your adventure you'll think, "Oh wait, that one legend was cool, I think I'll work that in," or "Oh, that area they mentioned is perfect for this, and the characters will have to watch for those local monsters on top of the rest." Ultimately, the more you know about the game the better your game will be, because you have more information at your fingertips. And it will definitely show.

Now, does this mean you have to read every supplement and article and column and Web page related to the game? Well, you probably should, but who really has that much free time? Read as many as you can—keep an eye on what's going on and read anything you think might be useful. If you're running a *D&D* game, check each issue of *Dragon* for useful articles—if you have a gnome in the party, you should definitely read the January issue about gnomes, but you can skip the July issue on halflings if your setting doesn't have any halflings at all. You can also ask your players to help—offer a few extra experience points for anyone who brings good articles or supplements to your attention, and that way they'll help you catch anything you might want or need to read.

## Changing the Rules

Let's face it—everything is subjective. Some people love a movie, while others hate it. Some people enjoy fantasy novels and others think they're foolish. Everyone has an opinion, and our opinions color how we look at everything. You can be best friends with some-

one and completely disagree with him about something.

That doesn't mean either of you are wrong, just that you have different views on the subject.

**“There is nothing worse than watching a GM spend several minutes checking her facts.”**

— James M. Ward, p. 100

The same is true of games, of course. Everyone has a different take on each game. You may love a particular setting, but your friends may think it's silly or boring. You may feel a rules system is too cumbersome, while your friends

enjoy the level of detail and realism. That's all well and good when you're just talking about a game, of course, but what do you do when you're running it? What happens when you come across a rule you just don't like?

You change it.

One of the typical responses to this advice is, "What gives me the right to alter a rule that's in the book?" The answer is—you're the gamemaster. It's your game. The person who wrote the book had opinions, too, and the rules are what he thinks works best for the game world. You may not agree. In your game, you're the one in control, not whoever wrote the book. As a game designer, I always mention in my games that "you should feel free to modify the rules as you see fit." I think that's implied in every game manual, though. When you purchase a game and take it home, you're also buying the right to change the rules and the setting to suit yourself and your players. Can you publish those alterations? No—that's infringing on the creator's copyright, and it's rude besides. But within your own group you should feel free to change the rules as necessary.

Which leads us to the next question—what's necessary? That can be answered only by you, because it depends on your GMing style. Perhaps you enjoy combat encounters and use them a lot in your games, but the game you just bought has a very simple combat system with very little detail. You want something more complicated that includes factors like range, cover, wind, maneuverability, etc. So design a new combat system and plug it in. Perhaps it's the other way around—the game designer is clearly into combat and gave twenty pages on the combat system, but you prefer to speed through combat and get to intrigue. So you modify the system, streamlining it for speed and simplicity, and plug that in.

# REDESIGN THE GAME

The first guideline for changing the rules is “Never change more than you have to.” The way initiative is handled works fine for you, but you don’t like the way damage is done. So leave initiative alone. Why shouldn’t you change it as well? Several reasons. First off, you have limited time, because in addition to changing the rules you still have all your normal GM responsibilities of prepping, plotting, etc. The less you change, the more time you have for everything else. Second, some rules are more intertwined than others. If you change initiative, you may have to change spellcasting as well, and that may lead to still other changes. The fewer parts you alter, the less it will affect the whole. Third, you’re going to need to explain each of your changes to your group—not justify them, since you are the GM, but explain what you’ve done so your players aren’t lost or confused. Some of them may have the game you’re playing, or perhaps they’ve played it before, so the less you change the less they have to relearn and the easier it will be for them to adjust. Finally, if you find yourself changing a large portion of the rules, you probably shouldn’t be using this game system to begin with—clearly it doesn’t work for you. Find one you prefer, one that you generally like.

Another thing to remember when changing rules is that sometimes it’s more trouble than it’s worth. For example, you’re reading through a game and you run across the rules on freezing. “Those are pretty silly,” you think to yourself. “That’s not how I’d do it.” A few weeks later you decide to run that game, so you sit down and rework the freezing rules. But your campaign is set entirely in the desert region of the planet! Just because a rule bothers you doesn’t mean you should change it, because you may never wind up using it. Only change rules you think you may need later.

So what do you have to think about when you change a rule? Well, the first thing is, “What sort

## “Never change more than you have to.”

of game am I running?” The rules have to work for your game—if you’re doing a game that’s heavy on intrigue and light on combat, why would you want to redesign the combat system and make it more involved? Rules should be judged on how they work for your particular game, how they fit with your image of the game and the characters and the storyline.

Let’s look at a specific example. In d20, characters don’t have wound penalties. They take damage and are fine until they hit 0 hit points. Then they’re unconscious and unable to move. Once they hit –10 hit points, they’re dead. That means a character with 2 hit points (from an original 90) is still going strong and doing full damage. If you’re running a heroic game, that may be fine—epics (and movies) are filled with stories of people who get shot, stabbed, poisoned, etc. and still function at full ability, right up until they collapse. Maybe you want a more realistic game, and realistically it doesn’t make sense for someone to take so much damage (88 points out of 90 is more than 97% of the body’s total capacity) and still be able to function normally. With that much damage, even if you’re still standing you should be weak, shaky, uncoordinated—generally not much help in a fight. So if you’re doing a more realistic game you’ll probably want to add wound penalties.

One of the areas in d20 that is reworked most often is the combat system, specifically the “attack of opportunity” rules. That’s because these rules are complicated and don’t make much intuitive sense. You get an attack of opportunity—a free attack—when someone wanders into your threat range, but not when he moves out of your threat range. That seems almost backward—





BEYOND THE GAME

shouldn't you get a free shot at the person walking away from you, but not a free one at the person coming toward you? Certain actions, like casting a spell, grant your opponents an automatic attack of opportunity, but others, like charging full-tilt, don't. Yet charging lowers your AC, since you're not paying attention to sidestepping people, and spellcasting doesn't. Unless you have Combat Reflexes, you get only one attack of opportunity, even if three guys just walked into your threat range backward. A lot of GMs simply ignore attacks of opportunity altogether. Others limit them to specific situations—you only get an attack of opportunity if the other person is clearly not paying attention to you (he has his back to you, he's aiming at someone else and focused on that, he's cowering with his head in his hands). If you use miniatures for combat, the attacks of opportunity are much easier to handle, because you can tell at a glance when someone is within range or not. Without miniatures, it's very hard because you have to guess at where you stand in relation to others.

Another example is spellcasting and its components. In d20 you have verbal, somatic (bodily—usually this means hand gestures of some sort), and material components (*lightning bolt* requires a bit of fur and an amber, crystal, or glass rod). Most spells require all three. Without the proper ingredients, you can't cast the spell. If your hands are bound, you can't cast the spell. If you're gagged, you can't cast the spell. D20 has Feats to get around two of these—Silent Spell lets you cast a spell without the verbal component, and Still Spell lets you cast without the somatic element. So if your game

**“Only change rules you think you may need later.”**

involves magic, and you picture the magic as using a rigid system with proper ingredients and gestures and words for each spell, the existing d20 magic system is perfect. If your world has wizards who can perform magic with a wave of their hands, you're obviously going to want to ditch the verbal and material components. Perhaps you'll add something so that a character might require either words or materials because he isn't as good at wizardry, but that won't be a common thing. Maybe your game has magic that is controlled purely by will, with no words or gestures or materials at all. That means you'll definitely need to rework the magic system to eliminate those factors.

This leads to another question—how do you rework it? That's going to depend largely on what you need to get the job done. If your world has magic through force of will, you can tell your players, “Ignore the components for spells—just tell me what you're doing and make a Will save, and if you succeed the spell is cast.” That's quick and easy and means you don't have to spend much time on how the magic works. But if your game is all about willpower and wizardry and the mental conditioning necessary to cast spells, you're going to have to sit down and think a bit more. Are there any outside factors involved, like the time of day, the caster's physical health, or the temperature? Ignore anything that doesn't matter. Then figure out how the remaining factors relate. Try to make the rules mesh with the rest of the system—for d20, you should obviously use a 20-sided die for the roll. Using a different die without a very good reason will only confuse everyone, including you, and will keep things from running smoothly.

On the other hand, if you have a good reason for using something different—the use of magic is actually foreign to the world and involves focusing the mind in a way entirely alien to natives, and is actually at odds with



the laws of reality—go ahead. Just be sure you know why you did that and recognize that it will make the rule stand out from everything else.

One thing you never want to do is question a rule midstream. If you think you may need to alter something, do so before you start the game, but saying, “Y’know, I don’t like that—why don’t we do this instead?” partway through a session is a bad idea. It shows that you didn’t prepare fully for the game, because you didn’t already consider and alter the rule, and it puts you in the position of asking your players what you should do, which can undermine your authority.

That doesn’t mean you can’t change a rule later on—perhaps your characters wind up in the arctic after all, and you never did alter that freezing rule. So change it now, but don’t tell the players that you’ve just changed it—tell them, “By the way, now that we’re in the arctic I should mention that I’ve modified the freezing rules. I didn’t tell you before because it wasn’t an issue while you were in the desert.” Now your players are impressed with your foresight, since you thought to change rules that weren’t even applicable before!

If you’re not sure about a rule, it’s okay to do a test run. Get some players together—it doesn’t have to be the ones who will be in the actual game, though that’s usually the easiest—and tell them that you want to test out some rules beforehand. Run the game with the existing rules to see how they work and how they feel to you. Then run the game again with your alterations. You can do a single encounter for this, with pregenerated characters. The point is to see what the rules feel like and make any changes before you get to the real game.

This doesn’t make you look bad to your players, by the way. If anything, it shows that you’re planning ahead and that you’re basing your decisions on actual gaming tests instead of merely on your opinion.

## When Rules Don’t Apply: Working without a Net

We’ve talked about what to do if you don’t get the die rolls you want or need for the story, and what to do if you think a rule doesn’t work and needs to be altered. But what happens when you don’t even have a rule, or you have a rule but it doesn’t help much?

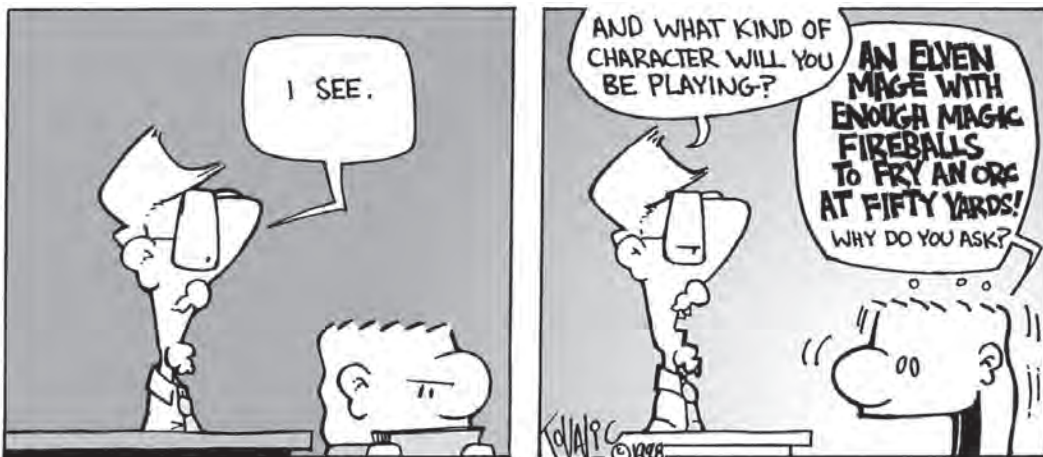
Let’s work with a specific example. You’re playing a *Fudge* game, and one of the PCs is wandering about alone. You ask him to make a Situation roll, and he gets a “good” result. Great—but what exactly does that mean?

Another player is searching in someone’s personal library for a particular book which he is certain is there. You ask him to roll and he gets a “mediocre” result. Again, what does that mean?

Or the party is scaling a cliff wall, and one of the characters fails his Climb check and falls. How much damage does he take? If you’re playing *Fudge*, the main book doesn’t give you falling damage. Some games do, but it often requires searching through the book for a while before you can locate the particular passage. While you’re doing that your players are sitting around, getting more bored and falling more out of character

with each passing minute.

So what do you do? The answer is—you make it up. That’s what being a GM is all about, after all—being the one in charge of descriptions and outcomes, describing what happens



to your players. If you know where the rule is and can find it quickly, that's fine—go ahead. If it's going to take you a while, or you're not sure there is a rule for that, just keep going. The flow of the story is far more important than getting one small rule right, especially if it's something you may not need again.

(As a caveat, to this, however, if you know your players are going to be scaling a cliff wall next game, take some time before that session to look and see if there are rules for falling damage. You may decide not to use them, but at least you know what they are and where to find them.)

This is particularly important in a game like *Fudge*. Why? Well, *Fudge* is a very simple system, very easy to learn and to use, and that's largely because it has only nine possible roll results. Whatever it is you're doing, you're going to get a result of Abysmal, Terrible, Poor, Mediocre, Fair, Good, Great, Superb, or Legendary. That's easy, right? But what do results like that mean? What is a "good" result? If you're trying to find a book and you get a "mediocre," did you find it or not?

This is where being the GM comes in. It's your job to interpret results for yourself and for the players. The player got a "good" Situation roll, so he meets up with someone who knows him and is reasonably friendly, but who isn't actually going to help in the quest. He got a "mediocre"—he finds the book but it's damaged.

But how do you decide what it means? Clearly you don't want me to just say, "You'll figure it out" or "You learn as you go." After all, this is the book of secrets, and you want the actual answers. So here is what you do:

When the situation comes up and you make the player roll, think to yourself, "What is the best possible outcome here? What is the worst?" On the Situation roll, the best outcome would be to meet a close friend and ally who is willing to help and actually has vital information. The worst possible outcome would be to run into the character's adversary, who has learned of the character's plans and is out to foil them. Now look at the roll. Good is better than average but not at the very top, so the result is closer to the best possible than it is to the worst. The same is true for the book example. The best outcome would have been to find the book

quickly and have it in pristine condition. The worst would have been for the book to be missing and for the character to find a similar book instead but one with faulty information that has been booby-trapped by his enemies (to stop anyone who's looking for that info). Mediocre is closer to the bottom than to the top, but not by much, so the book is there but damaged and some of the pertinent information is probably illegible.

It's okay to ask the player some questions here. "Is there anyone you're hoping to meet, or to avoid?" gives you info for the Situation result. "How much do you think your enemies know about this book?" can help with the book search result. Don't ever come out and say, "What would you like to happen?" or "What's the worst that can happen?" That suggests that you don't know, and the player may lie to you ("Oh, at worst the book will be misfiled and it'll take me a bit longer to locate it"), but he'll almost certainly lose some respect for your position as GM because he'll think you can't come up with answers on your own. If you ask the right questions, you won't look like you need help but you will be able to tailor the results more to the character and the situation, and they'll appreciate that.

That's how to expand on a vague rule—mentally map out a continuum of results, decide where the roll lands on that line, and use that. What do you do when there isn't a rule, as with the falling damage? You make it up, of course, but how?

One thing is to be consistent. It doesn't make much sense in a *Fudge* game to have the player roll a d20 for falling damage! Most situations can be handled with a single die roll, perhaps two. For the falling damage, have the player roll his Agility to see whether he can twist around into a better landing position. The best possible result is that he curls into a ball (so his head and limbs are protected) and lands on his butt, which won't take as much damage. The worst possible result is that he lands squarely on his head, so that his full weight comes down on his head and neck. While the player is rolling, think about damage. Clubs are useful comparisons for falling, because they're blunt objects that simply smack you around (rather than stabbing you or cutting you); getting hit with a club and falling sev-

**“The flow of the story is far more important than getting one small rule right...”**

# ADAPT TO THE GAME

eral feet should be about the same. So if a club does 3-4 points of damage normally (a Hurt result), falling from about 10 feet should also Hurt the character. Twenty feet would probably cause a Very Hurt result, and if the character's falling from 30 feet he should be Incapacitated (assuming no special circumstances). That gives you a baseline. Go up and down a bit—worst being Near Death, least being Scratched—and you have your results. The player gets a Terrible roll and lands on his head, resulting in Near Death. Or he gets a Legendary roll, falls just right, and is only Scratched. Or somewhere in between.

The key here is not to take too long. After all, if there isn't a rule for this, no one can claim you did it wrong. Don't tell the players how you came up with the possibilities, or what the other outcomes were—just tell them the result.

The other important thing is to make sure your new rule fits the feel of the game. If your characters are these amazing heroes and heroines who are always pulling off amazing stunts and emerging unscathed, it doesn't make much sense for them to get killed or paralyzed falling off a cliff. In a game like that, the worst possible result might be that the character is knocked out and loses his memory for a few hours, while the best possible is that he does a somersault as he hits the ground and pops up completely unharmed. *Fudge* actually works to your advantage here—no one can say, "Hey, the book says he takes 10 points of damage from that fall" because all it says is that he got a mediocre result, and what that means is up to you. As long as it fits the feel of the game and seems fair, the players won't complain.

We're back to consistency again, but in a different way. If you decide that one character's worst result for the fall is to be knocked out and get temporary amnesia, when another character falls you can't tell him he's permanently paralyzed. Once you've set up how something works, you have to stick to that. Of course, if one character is an acrobat and the other is a clumsy bar-keeper, they may have different ranges, but if you've decided that falling won't do any actual damage you need to follow through with that.

One of the biggest areas for makeshift rules is combat. Most systems give you the basics—how you try to

hit, how you try to dodge, how much damage a sword or gun does, etc. What do you do when someone pulls a weapon that isn't on the charts? I once ran a game where a character found a blunderbuss at the bottom of

a pile of rubbish. It wasn't working, but he had Gunsmithing and managed to repair it. So here we are in a combat

## **“...make sure your new rule fits the feel of the game.”**

scene, and someone has a knife and someone else has a pistol (both of which are listed on the damage charts), and this guy has a blunderbuss filled with nails! That can happen. People often grab whatever's at hand, and you have to decide how much damage a frying pan does, or a mailbox, or a frozen chicken. Remember that speed is an issue for you, especially during combat—you don't want to put things on pause while you flip through a book or two. Think of what weapons you do remember and how much damage they do, then find one that's a reasonable equivalent. A frying pan is the same a club, just shaped oddly. A mailbox still on the post is also a club, though it does slightly less damage because the mailbox is lighter weight and hollow. A frozen chicken would do full club damage, and if fired from a bow (yes, people do things like this in games!) it will do as much as a normal arrow—it's blunt, so it won't pierce, but it's much heavier so it hits harder. Don't worry—no one is going to get a frozen chicken and demonstrate that it shouldn't do as much damage as that, or compare a mailbox to a club to show how it's just as dangerous. Just keep things moving, and as long as your answers aren't totally absurd they'll be fine.

The other danger point as far as determining rules and rolls is difficulty. Whenever a character does something, you have to give him the difficulty. That means you have to make a decision on how hard it is to accomplish that task. Most games give you a few examples, but not nearly enough; how could they? It's nice to know that building a campfire is easy, but that doesn't tell you how hard it is to whittle a flute.

The key again is to think of something comparable. If building a campfire is easy, then building a bonfire is harder because it's the same thing only larger and stronger. Building a torch should be about the same as a campfire, since it's smaller and denser but has to stay lit longer and uses much the same skills. If you can find or remember a comparable task and its difficulty,

BEFORE THE GAME

all you need to do is decide whether this new task is easier or harder. If you can't think of anything that fits, think about skill levels. A Boy Scout has to be able to build a campfire. He should also know how to whittle, at least a little, and how to put up a tent. So whittling and building a campfire should be about even. Whittling a flute is more complicated, but you already have the basics for whittling, and you can build from there.

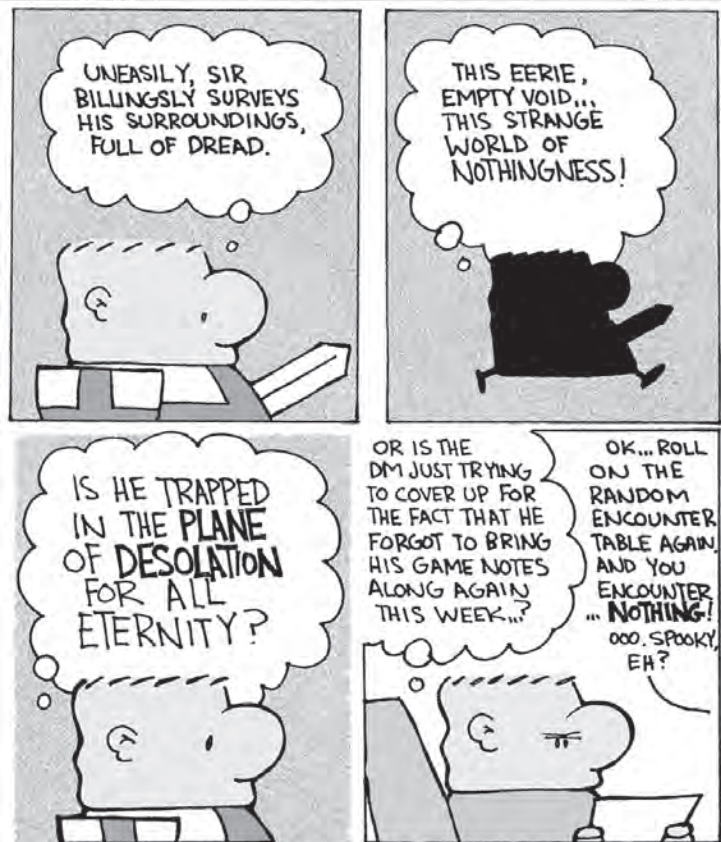
Remember to check for modifiers as well. Building a bonfire may be hard, but the character may be a pyromaniac with a lot of practice at making fires. If the area has a lot of dry brush, it's easier to get the fire going and keep it going. If it rained that morning, it'll be more difficult than usual.

Players will usually remind you of anything they have that should make the difficulty lower. They won't always tell you if they have something that will make it higher, so keep an eye on them. It's fine to say, "I've already factored that in" or even "You're right, lower the difficulty by one." Forgetting their abilities doesn't make you weak, since it's their job to remember those and to remind you of them.

Again, keep an eye on the story when you come up with difficulties. If the characters are only on their way some place and building a campfire is unimportant, you can always say, "Fine, it takes you a while but you get a fire going" without even bothering for a roll. If they need the fire to signal their informant where they are, the fire is

now important to the story and you should make them roll. That way they know they can screw it up, so it's worth more when they get it right. Don't go too easy on them, though—if you do have them roll for something, give it the difficulty you feel it deserves. If they can't get the fire going and their informant doesn't find them, they clearly should have planned better (finding a more sheltered location, bringing dry tinder) and now they'll have to fix the situation.

**“One thing you never want to do is question a rule midstream.”**



In general, just remember to put the feel of the game first. As long as your rules and difficulties go with the story, the level of tension, and even the general feel of the game system, as long as they don't distract from the excitement, they should be fine. You'll get more used to the balancing act as you get more practice, until you don't even notice you're working without a net.

## Selecting a Setting

Now that you have your genre and your rules, you need the setting. Where will the game take place? Most genre-specific games offer you a specific setting, whether it's a portion of the solar system, a world, a continent, a city, or even a small town. That doesn't mean you have to use that setting, however. Some games will give you a generic setting—the *D&D* world is a generic fantasy world, as opposed to the specific Greyhawk or Forgotten Realms settings.

When are you setting your game? Is it modern-day, medieval, or futuristic? This is more for feel than anything—*D&D* would count as medieval, even though

# PREP THE GAME

it's not actually on Earth. Your genre usually determines your setting—obviously if you're doing a space opera game you aren't going to set it in 15th-century Italy.

**“The secret here, of course, is to find out what settings your players like best and give that to them.”**

— Lester Smith, p. 143

Are you using a real-world setting or an imaginary one? *D&D*'s setting is imaginary; *Ars Magica*'s is real (it's set in actual medieval Europe). Going with a real setting will limit you—you can't create buildings or

destroy landmarks without a good reason—but it also means you can probably find information about the location online or in a library. Imaginary settings

give you more options—who's to say there isn't a pair of feuding kingdoms separated by only a narrow bridge across a wide, angry river? But you also have more work to do—you can't just look at a street map and find the street the inn is located on without first creating the map and assigning all the street names.

Before you go any further, answer one question—what is the scope of this game? In other words, how far will the PCs travel? If this game is set in a single town and you don't expect them to leave the town during the adventure, you don't need to worry too much about the rest of the world—have at least an idea what lies beyond, what the nearest other towns are and the like, but you don't need to detail them. If the PCs are going to travel across the countryside, however, you need to know where the rivers are, where the roads are, all about the towns and cities they might travel through, and anything else along the way. The larger your scope, the more you'll need to have prepared, whether you get it out of a book or make it up on your own.

Should you use a premade setting? If the setting itself isn't the crucial element, or the setting you bought has the elements you need, yes—it will save you time and let you concentrate on other details. If your adventure is all about the creatures coming forth from the underground caves and up into the city, and the book has a town with underground caves beneath it, you're all set. But if the countryside detailed in the book is all marshland—no caves—you're going to need someplace else.

Some people love to detail their own



BEFORE THE GAME

settings—they draw maps, give street names, determine which shops are where, and even name all the inhabitants. If you're one of those, more power to you—you probably should create your own setting, because most store-bought ones won't have the level of detail you'll want. But if you don't care about who lives in the big corner house or what the shop near the center of town sells, just find a setting you can use. You can always detail things you need—if the shop needs to be a weaponsmithy, and the setting has it as a greengrocer's, change it to a weaponsmithy. Just make sure you do it before you start the game, and that you change it on the map as well, so the players don't wonder why the greengrocer has swords and maces hanging on his walls.

find anything in your collection, go to the store and look under that system; see if anything there catches your eye. One nice thing about d20 is the number of third-party adventures you can buy—some of them are excellent, and because so many companies are publishing them you have a wide variety to choose from, with all different styles and feels and genres.

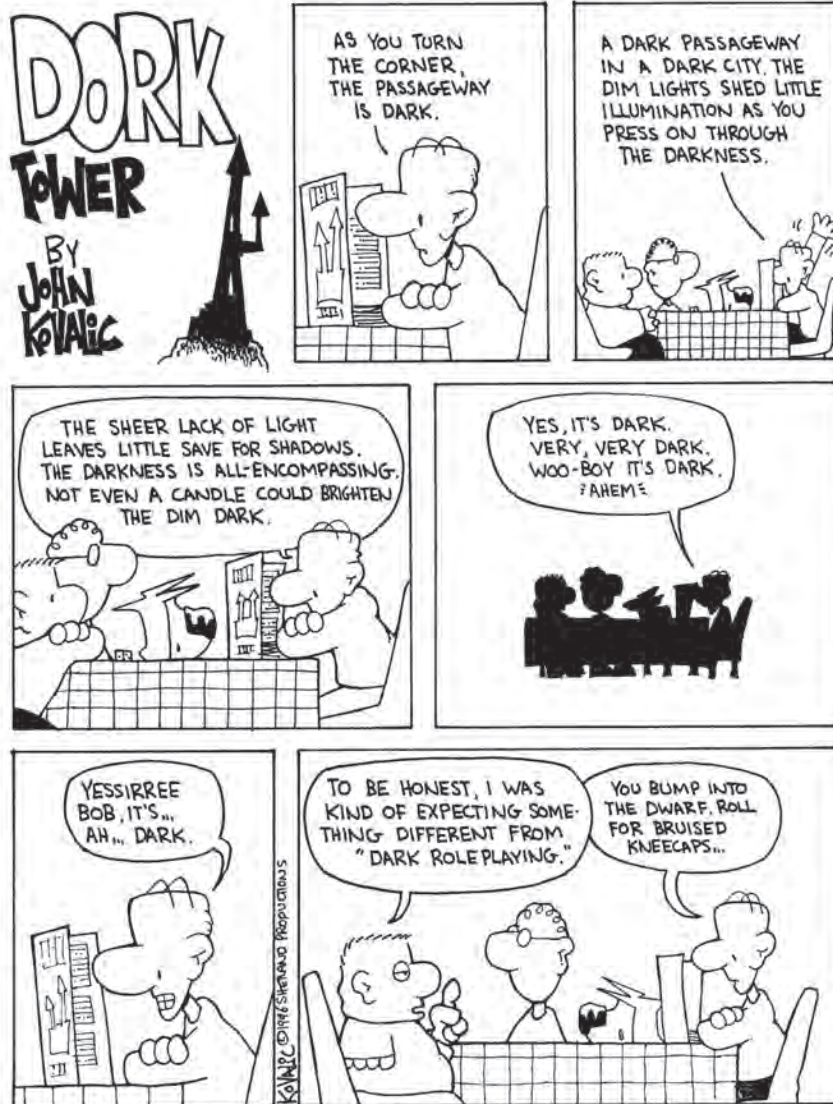
Keep in mind that, just as you can change rules, you can change an adventure. Actually, it's a lot easier to do with an adventure, because your players shouldn't have read it—they won't even know you changed something. So if you find an adventure you think is great—right genre, right setting, good plot, good feel—but you don't like an element or two—the villain is too weak or too silly or too obvious, the treasure is too much or

## Store-bought or Home-grown?

I've talked about altering rules if necessary and creating a setting versus using a pre-existing one. The same question arises with adventures. Should you create your own, or should you buy one to use? Again the answer is—which are you comfortable with?

A lot of this has to do with experience. If you've never run a game before, you're better off buying an adventure—it'll save you from worrying about the overall plot structure, and you can concentrate on running the game and getting used to the role of GM. If you're an experienced GM, you may want to make your own adventure—you know how to handle a game, and if you create your own adventure you can make sure it has all the elements you like and works the way you want.

As with game systems, I'd suggest your first action should be to look through your game collection, and especially through any books for the game system you're using. Check out any adventures you find. Do any of them grab you? Are they too cool to put down? That's a good sign—if you're hooked on them, you have a good shot at hooking your players. If you don't



REPAIR THE GAME

too little, the missing item is found too easily—use that adventure and just tailor it to your needs and desires. It really is less work to use an existing adventure. You should check, though, that

**“Running published scenarios is great ... when you can get away with it. Creating your own adventures is good, too ...”**

— Jean Rabe, p. 12

your players have not read the adventure already—if they have, you’ve lost the element of surprise, because they know who the bad guys are and where the treasure is and what the plot will be.

On the other hand, if you’re the type of person who wants to own your own plots, who likes to create from whole cloth—I know I am—you should write your own adventure. You can still use store-bought ones as guides—look at them to get an idea of structure and pacing, where conflicts can occur and how many crises to work in. Yes, it’s more work, but you’ll know the adventure inside-out, you can be sure your players don’t already know it, and it will fit exactly what you want, because that’s how you built it.

## Gathering Your Players

Now that you’ve settled on the game, it’s time to gather your players. But wait, shouldn’t you come up with the adventure first? No! Why not? Because if you design the adventure first, you’ll be more restricted in who can play, at least if you want to make sure the players and characters all have a good time. If you choose your players first, you can let that influence the adventure as you create it.

Here’s an example culled from reality. I have a very good friend who’s been in several of my games and has even helped me playtest. He’s a great guy and a good gamer—and he hates power. I don’t just mean power-gaming—I mean power. He actively dislikes having a character get more powerful, because he thinks in real life people don’t do that, beyond the minor improvements in physique. So when I run a game with him in it, I know that if the game is all about finding new sources of power he’s not going to like it, which means he won’t have a good

time, which will dampen everyone’s enthusiasm a bit. If the game is made to be more about thoughts and discovery, he’ll love that. Always know your players. So what should you look for when picking your players? Well, go for friends, of course, and for gamers if possible, although if you have a friend who you think would be good as a gamer and has never tried it, bring him into it. You want people who will have a good time with it, who can enjoy playing roles and who have good imaginations—and who don’t take themselves too seriously. That can be key to a good game—players have to be able to distinguish between the game and reality, so that if another PC attacks their characters (for a good in-game reason) they don’t take it personally, and if their characters die they don’t decide that you hate them.

You also want people who like the genre you’ve selected. If you’re going to do a high fantasy game, don’t get people who hate all fantasy. People who know the game system





are good, since it means they like the genre and they're familiar with the rules, but if you're a beginning GM or have never run this game before be careful—if you have players who know the game better than you do, they might correct you whenever you make mistakes. That can be a good thing if you're confident enough to deal with it, but it can throw you off, lower your confidence, and mess up the rhythm of the adventure. You are the final authority, after all. That doesn't mean you have to pick players who've never played this game system, just be aware of the risk if they know it as well as or better than you do.

Think about numbers as well. How many people do you want in your game? Some people like smaller groups, because they're easier to control and easier to keep in one place, and you have more time to devote to each character. Others prefer large groups, because you have more variety and the characters have more options among them; they also tend to affect the plot more, because they're a larger group and can cause more mischief. I prefer to have four or five players—it's enough people to give a good mix, but small enough that they can still all work together and that I can still deal with each one individually.

Make sure your players all know each other—if they don't beforehand, get them all together just to hang out. That way you can see the group interact a bit. Some people are lucky—all of their friends get along with one another. Others have friends who just can't relate, for whatever reason, so just because you get along with everyone in the room doesn't mean they all get along. It's important that your group should work well together and like one another. They don't all have to become best friends, but they should be able to have fun, and they can't do that if two of the players hate each other's guts.

Something to keep in mind when choosing your players is that everyone has a life. That means that even once you've chosen your group and found a day that works for everyone, there will be times when people can't show up because they've been called in to work or they're sick or something else came up. We'll talk about what to do with their characters later, in "Zombies and Ghosts" (p. 46). But this should influence the number of people you have in your group. I've been in

groups that had ten or more players, because no more than six showed up at a time—and I've been in groups of four, where if two or more people missed a session we couldn't play. So decide what the minimum you can run through a session is and use that as a base—if the players all seem able to commit to showing up regularly you only need that base plus two more, but if several of them say they might have things come up you'll want a few extra for padding, up to the maximum you're comfortable running.

## Time and Place

Once you have your group, you need to figure out where and when to play. Obviously it has to be someplace big enough to hold the whole group, and it has to be comfortable—you'll probably be there for several hours at a time. It should be someplace you're comfortable with, since you're the GM—being in a strange place or one you don't know that well can undermine your authority. It also needs to have whatever you require for a game—enough seats, of course, but probably a table or open space, a bathroom nearby, possibly a fridge, a stereo, whatever else.

The ideal place is usually a living room, if yours or a player's is large enough. That way there are couches and a bathroom and a fridge, and it's private enough that you don't

have to worry about people harassing you while you play. If no one has an apartment or a house that will work, you'll probably need a public area. You can rent a space someplace—some cities have game stores with tables for gaming, and you can reserve one of those—or you can try to find some place to just hang out and play. Some restaurants will let you sit for hours as long as you keep ordering drinks and such—you should check beforehand to make sure they won't mind and that it's quiet enough and private enough for you to play. If you're on a college campus, there's usually a student center, which often has lounges and side rooms—those work well, and you can usually reserve one of the side rooms. College dorms also often have lounges, and sometimes apartment buildings do as well. Make sure there aren't too many people traipsing

**“The biggest concerns with finding a space to play are comfort, privacy, and accessibility.”**

through, since that'll get disruptive, and that it has whatever you'll need for the game (or can accommodate them—a conference room may not have a stereo, but it'll have outlets and you can bring a boombox).

The biggest concerns with finding a space to play are comfort, privacy, and accessibility. Can all of your players reach the location easily? Can everyone get back without difficulty? This isn't a big issue if you're in college—the college campus tends to be central, and no one's that far away—but if you're out of school it can be a concern. Here in New York, some subways and buses run all night, but others don't, so playing past a certain hour isn't an option if people want to make it home before dawn. Check with everyone in your group to be sure they're okay with the spot you chose.

Then there's the question of time. How often are you going to run your game? Weekly? Monthly? Daily? It's a matter of how often people can get together, how long it takes you to prepare, and how much time you think is safe to allow in between. Why safe? Well, that's the biggest danger with spacing sessions far apart—people forget what happened the last time (and the time before that) and you lose the momentum of the game, so it takes longer to recapture each session. I prefer weekly—it's often enough that you get into the habit, so people remember to show up, and it's close enough that you remember the previous sessions and can get back into it, but it's long enough that you have time for other things in between, time to dwell on events, and time to prepare. Biweekly also works, though it does require more “okay, remember that last time” to start with and it's easier to forget—oh, we're playing this week and not next week? Anything further apart and you risk losing players altogether; more often than weekly and you run the risk of overkill, though if everyone's really into the game playing twice a week can work just fine. Again, remember that people have lives—you may want to play twice a week, and the players may want that, but you may find only one day that works for everyone.

Think about what time to play as well. This will affect the mood of the game. If you're running a dark, eerie horror game, you don't want to play in the middle of a Saturday afternoon—it's hard to maintain terror while the sun is streaming in and kids are out playing. Go for night instead. If you're doing a humorous game, daytime is fine. Weekdays tend to be more tense, because you've come from class or work and you have to go back the next day. Weekends are more relaxed, more casual, and so not as good for dramatic situations. Friday night is a great time to play, since everyone's just come off the week and most people have the next day off, so you

**“For those blessed with a place to host games, be it a store, large apartment, or parent's basement, your first step is to ensure that it's not a disaster area.”**

— Hilary Doda, p. 110

can play late and everyone's eager to have fun and still a bit tense but starting to relax.

How long will your sessions be? If you want to run six hours at a time and people have to head home by 1:00 a.m. each night, you'd need to start at 5:00 p.m.—that may limit the days you can play. If you prefer marathon eight-hour sessions, you'll probably have to play on weekends, but if you're fine with four or five hours you can do weeknights. Every GM is different—some like short sessions because they can build tension, while others prefer marathons where a lot is done. If you're playing every week or more than once a week, short sessions are fine; if you're playing less frequently you should probably plan longer sessions so that you have a chance to accomplish a lot each time.

## Designing an Adventure

Okay, let's talk about the adventure itself. You've settled on a genre, a game system, and a setting. You have your players lined up, and you've done some research on the time and place and anything else you might need. Obviously, if you're running a store-bought adventure you can ignore this section, but if you're doing your own adventure, what do you do next?

The first thing is to determine the basic plot, and I do mean basic. Think one word, like “rescue” or “assassi-

nation” or “quest” or “exploration.” It has to fit the genre and the setting. Do you have one? Okay, great—that’s the kernel, the most basic thrust of the adventure. Now build on that. Go to one sentence: “rescue the princess from the evil sorcerer” or “assassinate the ruler of a small country” or “quest for the lost sword which can defeat the invading army” or “explore a small cluster of planets where a strange signal originated.” This is the basic plot—notice that it tells you what the characters will be doing, whether they’re going somewhere to do it, and what the target or opponent is (though not necessarily both). Now expand on that a bit. If you’ve ever submitted an event for a con, you’ve had to write up a blurb on the game—a few lines, about a hundred words at most, giving the players just enough to decide if they want to check it out. Do the same thing now—take your one sentence and expand it to three or four, give it a little more detail and a little intrigue or excitement. You might try phrasing some of it as a question: “The President has a problem. The dictator of a small country is threatening him—not with war but with blackmail. The President actually seems worried about it. What could the dictator have on him? Not that it matters—your job is to get to the dictator, kill him, and destroy any personal files. But he has an entire country on his side—can you reach him without being captured?” Now we have not only the goal (kill the dictator) and the setting (his small country) but the reason (he’s blackmailing the President) and the major complication (he has an entire country, and an army, to protect him).

Remember I said your players would influence the design of the adventure? This is where that comes in. Think about who’s in your game and what they like. Do they like covert ops? Then you’re on the right track. Would they rather charge in on a tank? You may need to modify this mission a bit or find some reason why they can’t do that—the President can’t act openly, so they have to be covert, but they do want someone with tank experience because the best way in is to steal a tank and use it to sneak past the rest of the army. What if someone prefers working from a distance, using computers to infiltrate? Again, either you’ll need to modify the mission or find a reason they have to be closer—perhaps the dictator has a dead man’s switch, and the

## “The first thing is to determine the basic plot..”

hacker needs to deactivate it on-site to save some vital resource from being destroyed. You want to make sure there are aspects of the adventure for everyone. If you’re lucky, your group is easy to work with and the adventure can be fairly straightforward—if this is a low fantasy game and everyone likes hack-and-slash, a dungeon crawl will be perfect and you don’t need to worry about clever little traps or side issues like dungeon politics and the dungeon owner’s mad scheme to sever the world from all magic. In a lot of groups, you’ll just need a few tweaks to make sure they’re happy—a little more intrigue for one person, a few straight combats for another, a puzzle or two for someone else. If everyone wants something else—well, I did say to think about that when assembling your group.

When designing the adventure, keep your scope in mind. Is this going to be a months-long adventure, a one-day event, or something in between? How many hours total do you expect it to last? You won’t hit that exactly (unless it’s a one-day event), but it will give you a baseline—if this is going to last a hundred hours (20 five-hour sessions, so five months if you play once a week) you can build more detail and more side plots. Don’t get overcomplicated—there’s no point in creating two entire side plots if the players will only have time to get to one at most, and you’ll be frustrated from having spent all that time for nothing. The best thing is to create a few side plots but just sketch them in—the dictator has an alliance with a known terrorist, a small revolutionary force is about to assault the capital, and the army has just developed a new supertank. If the players look like they’ll hit any of those, you can add more detail (see Jean Rabe’s “Winging It,” p. 122), but you know the opportunities are there so you won’t be surprised or left at a loss. If they never encounter any of those, you didn’t waste your time—instead you were able to concentrate on the main plotline and develop that to your satisfaction.

Remember, too, that everyone has a different idea of “preparation.” For some, it’s just a matter of working out basic plotlines, creating a few NPCs, and having some other subplots ready. Others go to the opposite extreme and detail every possible occurrence, every NPC in the area, and chart upon chart of what can happen when. Which do you feel most comfortable with?

**“Research can make the difference between a vibrantly detailed game world brimming with chrome and intricate Byzantine pathways, and another march through a metaphorical maze of twisty settings, all alike.”**

— Kenneth Hite, p. 72

If you're not sure, go for the middle ground—work up enough details so you'll feel confident running, but not so many that you'll feel trapped or that you get sick of it all. I like to create a basic timeline—I work out what events would occur if the players don't get involved, including a few side plots. That way, if the group never gets to one area, I know what happens there and how it might affect them later on, but when they do take action I can see how the timeline changes and can use that as a guide for what happens next and how it affects everything else. I like to have the major NPCs fully fleshed out, with stats and histories and personalities, then a few lesser ones with stats and some basic notes. Everyone else I just use basic stats for and give personality only if they're talked to at length.

One thing I do for my adventures is work out major situations. I'll detail a string of them—what happens when the characters enter the country, what happens if they try to steal a tank, what happens when they reach the capital, what happens when they confront the dictator, and the encounter with the terrorist. It's less “what happens,” though, than “here's the set-up, here's what they see, here's what the NPCs are doing.” I don't try to determine the outcomes beforehand—that's writing a novel, not running a game—but I set up everything necessary for the scene, other than the PCs themselves. This way, when they hit that scene I know what's going on and can run it easily. Any scenes in between I work out as I go—I may not use all of the prepared situations (for example, they may never encounter the terrorist), but I'm ready for all of them and I only have to worry about unforeseen events now. Most store-bought adventures are much the same way—they'll give you a string of events, but they won't necessarily detail everything in between. Some of that is boring stuff like walking, taking a plane to the destination, or repairing your armor and getting ready for the battle—it's a great

chance to do character work, let the players interact, but it doesn't need much plotting on your part. Others just weren't expected—who knew the group would try to parachute into the capital directly? But if you cover most of the situations you expect, you'll be in good shape to handle the rest.

## Tailoring

Now you have your group, they've created their characters, and you have your game—it's time to change them. Okay, not really—or at least not much. The thing is, you know what your game is now and who the characters are, and the two may not mesh perfectly. For example, you're running the dictator scenario, and you don't have anyone with computer experience or demolitions skill—how can you do the deadman's switch? No one will be able to disarm it. So you need to encourage someone to take one of the appropriate skills or alter the switch a bit so they still have a shot at it.

This is last-minute tailoring, and it shouldn't be a big deal—you've overseen the character creation process, so you know all the characters will work, and you've built the adventure with the players in mind so it should fit their likes and dislikes well anyway. But you will have to change at least a little bit. Sometimes that's good—one of the players has built a character with a sordid past, a secret former involvement with a terrorist group. You make that terrorist group the same one working with the dictator, and you now have an added complication to throw at them. Other times it's not so good—someone in the group is playing an albino, and they're going into a Latin American country, so he'll stand out like a sore thumb. You may have to talk to the player and ask him to change that a bit, but see if you can work around it first—maybe someone else is a master at disguise and can cover up his albino-

ism. That can actually make matters more tense as well—he'll be worried his disguise may slip and be more on edge throughout.

Your plot should still work fine with the PCs, especially if you have some flexibility. A dungeon crawl will still be good with a party of fighters and clerics, even if there isn't a thief—you may have to scale back on the traps a bit to give them a chance, and beef up the monsters, but that's easy enough. Really, it's more a matter of using the new material the players give you, working their characters' histories into the game a bit so it fits them more closely. They'll appreciate that—it shows you want them to be involved, and it means their characters will have more direct interaction with the adventure.

One thing to do is to run down the list of PCs in your head, and with each one stop and ask yourself, "What will he do in this adventure?" As long as you have an answer, everything is fine, but if you draw a blank you'll need to work something out. What would a poison expert do in the dictator scenario? Nothing—unless you alter it so the dictator's failsafe is to release a deadly airborne poison, killing everyone. Or the terrorist has poisoned the dictator to keep him under control, and they need to cure him before he'll reveal the location of the blackmail files. Everyone must have a role—it can be as simple as "kill any threats." Some roles are okay to double up—it's fine to have several bruisers, provided there will be enough combat to keep them all happy—while others you'll only want one of (why would the team need two poison experts?). Again, you were overseeing the character creation, so you probably have this under control already, but just make sure before you start. That way no one feels left out.

**“Having part of the character’s background or skills dedicated to mutual goals is important to party goals, but if the players have little or none of their own ideas invested in their characters the game will be flat.”**

— Ross Winn, p. 106

## Bringing in New Gamers

Houston, we have a problem.

The gaming industry appears to be dwindling. Fewer people are playing roleplaying games, which means that fewer people are buying them. That means that fewer game companies can afford to stay in business, which means there aren't as many new games at conventions and in stores, which means that fewer people pick up exciting new games and play. Which leads to there being fewer gamers, and a smaller hobby.

Why is that? One of the reasons is simply that new people don't join games as often. It's one thing to start playing with your friends when you're a kid, hanging out after school and pulling out the dice and the character sheets. It's a different matter entirely when you're

older and you don't know these people you're supposed to spend time with. A lot of would-be gamers join a group, don't feel as though they fit in, don't feel welcome, and wind up quitting after only a session or two. They never come back—more potential gamers gone.

What can you do?

When you're building your group, invite someone new to join. Where do you find a new gamer? The most obvious place to look would be comic and game stores—most gamers in your area probably drop by the local game store from time to time, just to see what new books are out. Put up a sign there. There are also Web sites now that list gamers and game groups in various parts of the country—you can put up your name and location and mention that you're looking for new group members, or you can scan the boards to see if anyone in the area is looking for a place to play. The other avenue is to check among your friends. Some of them have listened to you talk about gaming for years now, and yet they've never tried it. So invite them. After all, you already know them, so you know you get

# BRINGING A NEW GUY TO THE GAME

along with them, and they may even know the rest of the group already. They just don't know anything about gaming.

So let's assume you've invited someone new to join the group. What now?

First off, you can try being nice to the new member. Remember what it's like for you any time you're in a similar situation—first day of classes, first day at a new job, first day in a new town or city or apartment complex. That's what he's feeling. So show a little sympathy. Say hello, chat with him a bit, try to make him feel

more at home. Even if he's already friends with someone else there, he still hasn't been part of this gaming group before, so he's bound to feel like an outsider at first.

Encourage the other players to be nice to him, too. I know, it's hard to deal with a new person—you and your group have probably been gaming together for years; you know each other's habits, ignore each other's jokes, have memorized each other's pizza and soda preferences. Games are a chance to let your hair down (for those of you who work in corporate America, this may

be literally true, since you might have to keep your long hair tucked away during work hours)—you get to unwind, relax, and hang out with people you know and are comfortable with. It's often a chance to show a side of yourself that you normally keep hidden, such as the romantic soul in you that is expressed only in the persona of your lovesick young bard. Then into this comfortable environment comes a complete stranger, intruding and making you uncomfortable. Sure, it's tough to relax again and accept the new guy, but think about it from his perspective. He's just been thrust into a group of people who've known each other for a while and who spend a lot of time together. Add to that the fact that this new person may not know the game you're playing, the basic rules, which dice to use and when. Think about that when he walks in and looks around, and when you and the others feel awkward because there's somebody new. The best way to stop feeling uncomfortable is to encourage everybody to get to know him, get used to him, get friendly with him—and the best way to lead is by example.

Second, you can get him used to the game. This doesn't mean handing him a character sheet and saying, "Here's who you are," then shoving some dice at him and saying, "Here, use these." Ask if he's ever played any RPG's before—and don't sneer or run away if he



says no. Everyone has to start some time. If he hasn't, tell him a little about gaming in general, what it's like, why you do it, why it's fun. If he has played before, ask if he has ever played the specific system you'll be using. Tell him a little about the system—what genre it uses, what the general background is, what kind of dice it uses and a little about how. Don't give a full-blown lecture about why it's important to increase your dexterity instead of your firearms—he can pick that sort of thing up later. Just tell him enough so that he knows what the basic concept is.

Then tell him a little about the game you have planned. Introduce everyone else, if they haven't introduced themselves.

Next, ask the new member if he has ever created a character. Some people have gamed before, and might have even played this same system—they just haven't played with you. So he may be able to create a new one on his own. Others, especially those who've never gamed at all, will need a little help.

To be honest, the best thing to do at first is probably to keep any and all game books away from the new member and not let him anywhere near a character sheet. Why? Make him sit in on one session without playing, just watching and listening. This gives him a chance to see what the game is like and to understand what's involved. Then, at the end of

that session, help him create a character, so that he can play the following session. This way, he'll also have some concept of a character already—"I really like the archer you're playing, could I do that? Only, I'd sort of like to be entirely a city-boy, instead of being another wilderness scout."

**"...the rules are the least important thing for a new member to learn."**

Always remember that the rules are the least important thing for a new member to learn. Anyone can pick up the rules, and you can always lend him the book so he can read it at home. The real key is for him to get a sense of the game, a feel for the story—and an inkling of just how much fun it is to play. The best way to do that is to have the established members welcome him in, show him around a bit, and then demonstrate just how entertaining all of this gaming stuff can be. Don't try to impress him, though—he is going to see you snarfing down pizza and guzzling soda, after all. And

**"Be nice to new players; in fact, give their characters special advantages. 'Cheat' if you must, because for the GM with a new player, the end does justify the means."**

— John Nephew, p. 114

this isn't a school play—you don't have to perform for someone else. Just relax and have fun playing, as usual. The best thing you can show a new member is that this really is fun, and that it's okay to relax and enjoy it and get into the story.

After a while, that new member will feel at home, too. He'll learn the rules, he'll be familiar with the dice. He'll become a full-fledged member of the group. And you'll eventually forget that there was a time when he wasn't right there with you, playing the game.

# STARTING THE GAME

Okay, you have your game, your group, and your adventure. You're ready to go!

## Assembling the Characters

This is the bane of many a GM—“How do I get the characters together?” In a hack-and-slash, it might be as simple as saying, “Right, you all saw a notice saying ‘Adventurers Wanted’ and you all show up in the bar at the time it listed.” In most games, it will be a little more complicated. So how do you bring everyone together without being really obvious and unrealistic?

The easiest method is for everyone to be acquainted already. In an espionage game they may already be a covert ops team, and they've worked together before. In an interstellar game they might be the crew of a starship. You'll need to work up a little backstory and start by explaining that they've been together for a month or a year or however long, but it eliminates the problem of introductions. It is a little obvious, yes, but it'll get you right into the adventure, and with some games having them already together works just fine.

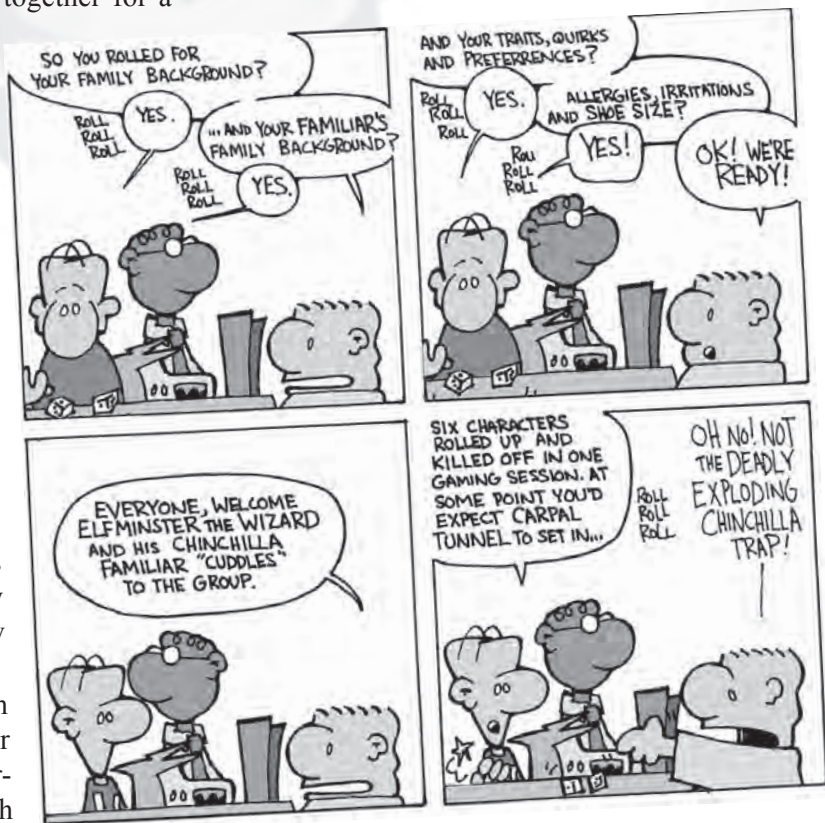
What if this isn't one of them? Part of that depends on the characters—what if someone is playing a kid fresh out of school/training/apprenticeship? That character can't have been part of the team or crew already. And you do NOT want to leave one character out—either everyone was together beforehand or they're all starting fresh, but having all but one be old friends and teammates guarantees that the outsider feels lousy and won't enjoy the game to start. So how do you bring them together?

Usually the best plan is to get them into small clusters. Have every character in the group know at least one other person there. The kid's dad was partners with

one of the veterans. Two of the others did basic training together. Another two met during wargames last year. The relationship has to fit the characters in question—a studious hacker and an illiterate grunt probably didn't train together. Try to avoid romantic entanglements; making two characters ex-lovers does mean they know each other, but they may be less inclined to work together, instead of more. And don't make it all the same type—not everyone will be old college buddies. Have a little variety.

Once you have them in clusters, try drawing links between the clusters. Of the two who practiced wargames together, one of them knows the kid because he tutored the kid in martial arts. One of the “met in basic” pair served with the veteran, and thus with the kid's dad as well. Things like that. You can probably link all or most of the groups together, and it's as believable as any other roomful of people in a small area or a particular profession—there are only six degrees of separation, and if you have anything in common that will drop a few degrees, so you're

**“Have every character in the group know at least one other person there.”**





STARTING THE GAME

bound to have someone you both know. Don't force it, though—if it gets too unrealistic, just let that connection drop. You can have some people who don't know each other, especially if most of the others don't know one another well. Just remember not to leave anyone out in the cold—it sucks to be the only character who isn't buddies with everyone else.

All of this should be worked out before you actually start the game. Take your players aside before the first session and tell them who they know and how, maybe give each cluster a chance to talk and cement the relationship. You can even do it well beforehand via e-mail—send out messages to each person listing who they know and how, and let them talk on their own time. Some of them will come up with entire shared histo-

**“Before the character creation process begins, let the players know that you expect them to build characters with intriguing flaws (or “story hooks,” as some GMs aptly call them)—for no particular reward.”**

— Steven S. Long, p. 70

ries, and you can work that into the game. Others will just confirm that they know one another, but that's fine—it means when you start they'll know who they can talk to easily.

Note, too, that there are exceptions to every rule. If your game hinges on the characters being complete strangers, great—you probably already have a mechanism to get them together, and their lack of familiarity is an element of the game. Or if you have two teams merging for this adventure, so that each half is tightly knit but doesn't know the other half at all, that's good too. Just be sure you know how the group relates before the game begins and that you've worked out the details for it—tell the players anything they need to know beforehand, and keep the rest until you start.



## Setting the Tone

The tone of the game is crucial to its success, and you need to set it early. If you're running a high fantasy game, open with a bit of magic or of heroism (or both) so the players can get into the sense of awe and wonder and mighty powers. If it's a horror game, you want to make the scene very real, very believable, and a bit eerie without overdoing it—let the tension start but don't overwhelm them early on. If you're doing a humorous game, start with something silly, get them laughing right away.

How do you create the right tone? Voice is a big factor here. Start describing the scene doing a Bugs Bunny impersonation and it's clearly silly; start with a deep voice and a formal tone and it's serious, dramatic, and maybe a bit spooky. Word choice is crucial—"Our story begins in the little town of" sounds like low fantasy, while "'T is an age of wonders, of marvels and of horrors, when mighty warriors and puissant mages stand forth against

# STARTING THE GAME

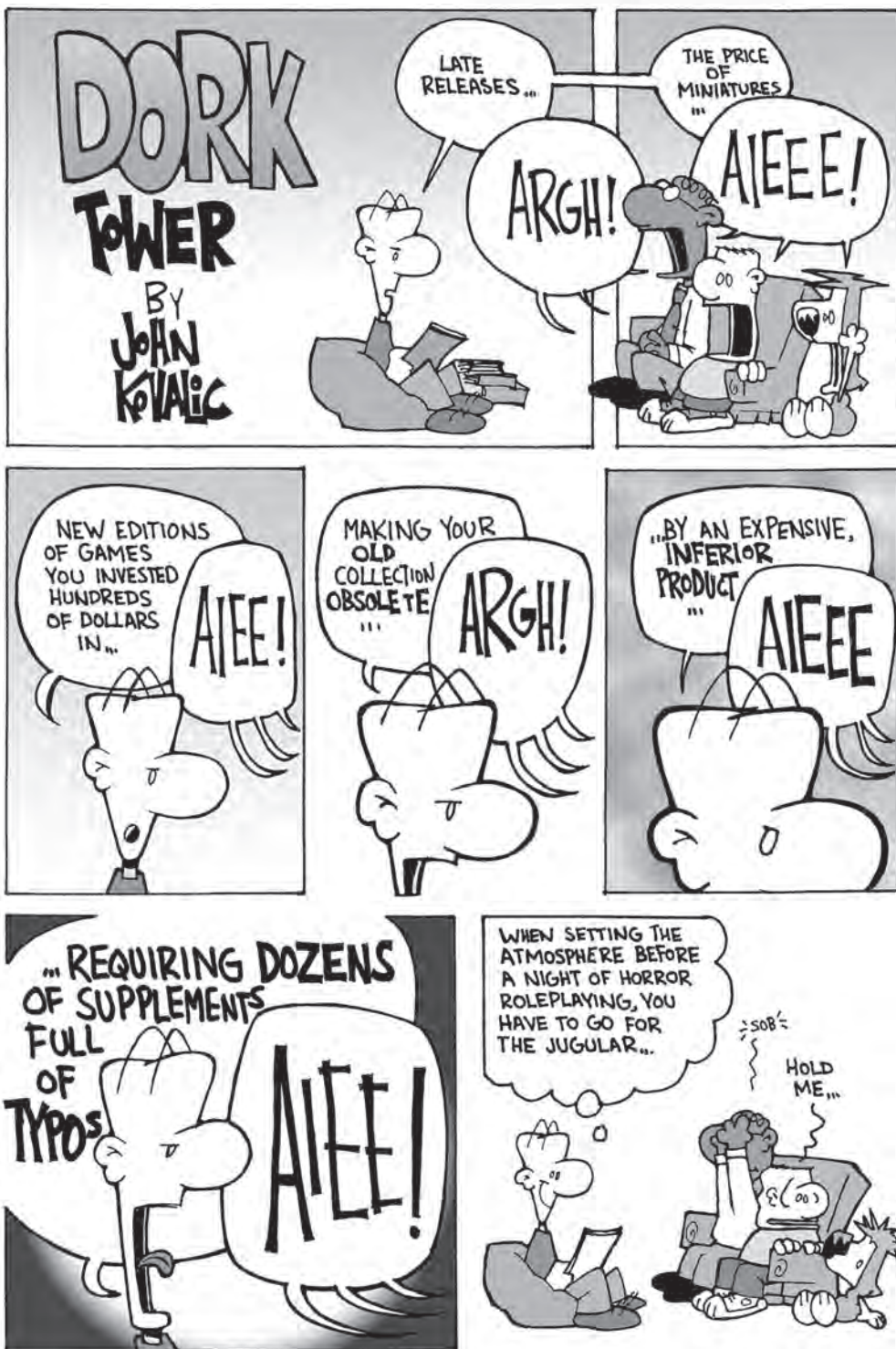
the tides of evil” is clearly high fantasy. Think about the books you’ve read and the movies you’ve seen that fit this genre—what is their wording like?

Lighting is also a factor, as we discussed when talking about time and place. If you pull the curtains, turn

off the lights, and use a single candle, the room becomes dark and ominous, perfect for a horror game or even a high fantasy where the heroes are struggling against great evil. Turn on a halogen lamp, so the light is cold and bright and clearly artificial, and you’re leaning toward science fiction.

The first scene is the key here. How do you start the game? If it begins with the characters already in combat against hordes of demons, we know what kind of game it is and we get an immediate feel for it—high fantasy. If it’s a briefing room with a superior officer giving mission details, we know we’re dealing with military or espionage. If it’s on a starship, clearly we have a science fiction game.

Your players know what the game is, of course. You’ve told them the genre and they’ve drawn up characters, so they’re predisposed to go along. But there’s a big difference between saying, “Okay, this is a science-fiction game” and saying, “The stars glitter coldly against the backdrop of space, only increasing the sense of isolation you all feel—even gathered in the forward observatory, the cold metal walls of the cruiser *Esperanza* leave you with a hollow sensation, and a part of you wishes you were back on your own planet instead of accelerating toward an unknown point in space.” The first simply tells you what the game is, but the second



gives you a feel for it, sets the scene and the mood, and lets you get into character more easily. That's the important thing—the sooner your players can get into character, the sooner they can help you carry the tone. The minute one of your players sits up straight and begins speaking in a monotone as his android navigation officer, the others will pick up on it and follow suit, and the tone is established.

The other question of tone involves pacing. Is this going to be a frantic adventure, constant crises with no time to think? Then the first scene has to reflect that—throw them into the action, don't give them time to talk and reflect, and make them jump in right away. Is this a more slow-paced adventure with time to ponder? Then the first scene should build slowly, allowing the PCs a chance to look around and get used to their environment and their situation. Is the game about not trusting their companions? Don't give them time to talk—you

**“Most gamemasters, with greater or lesser frequency, will find themselves in a situation where an added dose of excitement is needed in play.”**

— Larry D. Hols, p. 127

don't have to hit them with combat right away, but put them in places where they can't converse easily, like a courtroom or a busy tavern. Think about movies again—action movies usually start with an action scene, while dramas start with a character scene and horror starts normally but something seems a little out of place, heralding the later terror.

## Fostering Party Unity—without the PC Stamp

As I mentioned before, in a hack-and-slash you can often just start with, “Right, you've all answered an ad for adventure, and you find yourselves hired on to explore this cave system.” Most games require more work to bring the group together. Even if you've established little clusters of PCs and links between each cluster, you still need a reason for them to stick together. So what if two characters once took a class together? Does that mean they'll want to help each other out and work together? I can't stand some of my former classmates.

One danger here is the “PC stamp.” That's when you make it clear that someone else is a PC and therefore he should be trusted/liked/approached. If you're running a simple or humorous game, the PC stamp can work. In high fantasy it's fine, because you're all mighty heroes or powerful wizards or blessed priests and you're supposed to stand together against the forces of evil. But in more realistic games you need to give the characters a reason to work together beyond the PC stamp.



# STARTING THE GAME

Perhaps the easiest method is common danger. If the characters are all in a bar at the same time and a hideous creature smashes through the front window and starts shredding people, chances are the PCs will all band together against it. After the dust settles and the body cools, they might talk a bit, compare notes on what just happened, and decide that they should stick together—strength in numbers and all that. This is great if you start with a combat sequence, since it will bond the characters immediately.

Another option is to encourage common interests. Perhaps two characters are into puzzles and ciphers, and the game begins with a strange symbol scrawled on a wall. Both characters are in the area, hear about the symbol, and want to study it—they run into each other and decide to join forces. They then each bring their friends into it.

Proximity is a big factor, both of the PCs and of anyone else. If there's only one boat crossing the English

## “...let us assume that the players and gamemaster are united in one common desire: for Everyone To Have Fun.”

— Frank Mentzer, p. 130

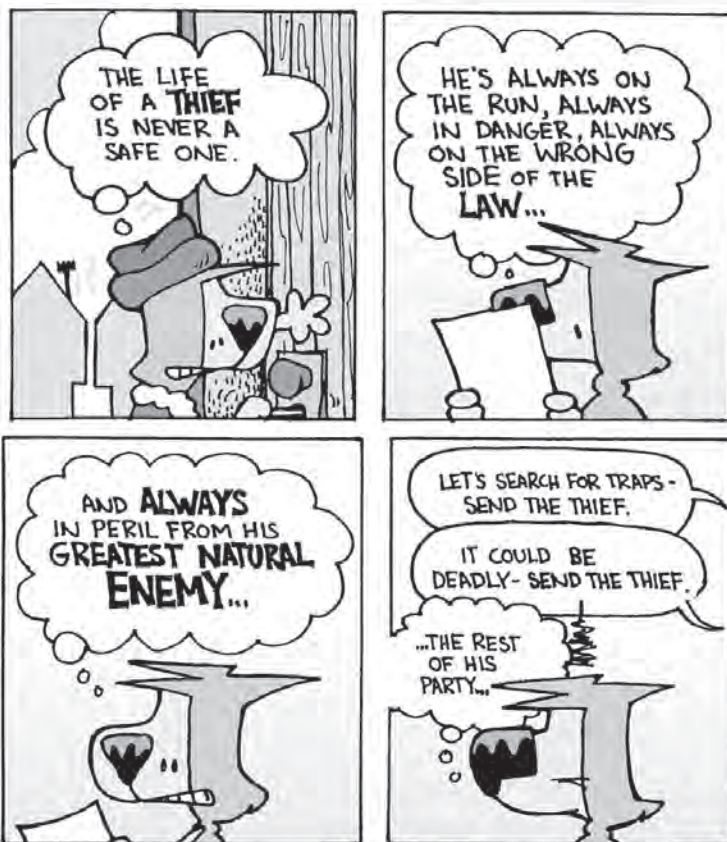
they have compatible goals. You don't have to give everyone the same goal if they're meeting this way—not everyone wants to study the new crystal energy source or the recently uncovered Egyptian scroll. But some will, and others want to find out who broke into the museum or the science lab, while others have heard rumors of mummies attacking or pirate raids and are going to investigate. All of these are compatible and can be linked together—if the players realize this, they'll probably decide to work together and share information.

Don't be worried if you throw the PCs together and then some of them wander off instead of joining the group. Give them a little time and then have them run into each other again. Drop small hints that other PCs

might have something they need or might be useful. Don't be too obvious about it—the players know what you're doing, of course, but you still want to make it feel reasonable.

One trick is to make it seem like you're talking about an NPC instead. Mention that a Professor Sparks has been working on the scrolls and is probably the man to see, before ever introducing the PCs to each other. The player you told this will probably think Sparks is an NPC he can meet and get information from. Then he's standing by the rail of the boat and hears someone addressed as Professor Sparks. He turns around, sees an older gentleman near the bow, goes over to introduce himself—and you call one of the other players over. You didn't need the PC stamp—the first PC was looking for Professor Sparks anyway—but now they have a reason to talk. You probably can't do this to everyone, but you can make it work a few times within the group.

Ultimately, if you give the group a reason to stay together they'll do so, provided their



# STARTING THE GAME

characters are compatible. Since you were able to tailor both the characters and the adventure to suit, they should work together. It's fine to have some friction, but there should be enough common interests to make everyone stick, and once they start talking among themselves they're far more likely to stay together, because then they'll know one another.

## Authority—and Interaction

As GM, you want to make it very clear from the start that you are in charge. This is especially true if you've never run a game before and if you're working with players who know the game system as well as you or better. Simply by starting the story you're establishing your authority, making it clear who's running things. This was also true every time you gave them house rules or character restrictions.

One thing, however, is that you should not be a tyrant. This is their game as much as yours, and everyone will have a lot more fun if you keep that in mind. Yes, you've chosen the game and created the adventure, and yes, you're running all of the NPCs—but they're the PCs, which means they're the stars. Think of it in movie terms—you're the writer and the producer and all the bit parts, but they're the starring actors and actresses. You give the impetus, the initial direction, and the plot, but they will influence things and will add to the story through their actions and dialogue. Don't stifle that—as long as they're adding to the game, you should let them work.

This doesn't mean you should let them walk all over you, however. Some players will try that, especially if they think they can get away with it—they'll demand special concessions, insist on extra attention, argue dice rolls and plot points, and generally try to dominate the game. Put your foot down with these players—just tell them that you are the GM and that your word goes. That's not being a tyrant, it's being the boss, and you are that.

Is this a fine line to walk? It can be. You have to stay in control but at the same time give them room to move.

It's tough. That's why being a GM isn't easy. But you can do it. Think again about movies and about big stars who like to change their lines or rearrange scenes. If the actor is good and the scene change or line change is good, a smart director lets him do it—it makes the actor feel more involved and thus more committed to the movie, and it helps the work as a whole. If the scene change is bad, however, the director will say no.

Ultimately, a game is more than the sum of its parts. Good players will change the direction of the game a bit because they'll add elements you didn't think of and do things you didn't expect. That's fine—roll with it, enjoy the changes and the fact that they can keep you guessing too, and work it all into your storyline. They'll actually respect you more for that, because it shows you're willing to let them influence events, and

**“They have to trust you; it’s how the game is played.”**

— Frank Mentzer, p. 130

they'll get more into the game because they'll see that it's as much their game as it is yours. They'll also respect you more when you put

your foot down and exert your authority, as long as you do so for a good reason—being petty and not wanting to change your story isn't a good reason, but holding to the rules you've already established is.

## On with the adventure!

Now that you have the group together and have set the tone, it's time to move into the game itself. Don't rush things—let them develop at a good pace—but don't be afraid to nudge them along if events are moving too slowly. As I said before, if you have good players they'll carry a lot of this as they get involved and start interacting. Just keep your story in mind—if they wander too far from the plot you've established and you want to bring them back, introduce an element that will drive them toward the story again. This is why I have a timeline, so I can see when new elements come in and use those to reestablish the main plot. For example, in the dictator scenario the PCs may find themselves in with the revolutionaries and get so caught up planning the revolution that they forget about the dictator's blackmail material. Then they hear that the terrorist is in the

# STARTING THE GAME

area. What's he doing here? Does he have some sort of arrangement with the dictator? Could they be working together to blackmail the President? Suddenly the blackmail is an issue again and the players decide to get back to that mission—it'll help the revolution anyway, and it is what they were sent here to do.

One thing you don't want is to let things stay quiet too long—people start to get bored and you lose all momentum. That's why you have major situations lined up already, so you can move to a new one whenever you need to. Just keep events rolling along and give the players enough to do and to think about so they stay interested and active.



# RUNNING THE GAME

Now that the game has started, you have to keep it moving. That isn't as easy as it sounds—there's definitely some work involved.

## Daily Preparation

And here you thought gaming was a way to put off doing homework! Not so, I'm afraid—to be a good GM there's definitely homework involved, and as with any class you have to do the work or you'll flunk the course. So what kind of work do you have left after you've already started the game? Well, there's your daily prep, of course—this is the stuff you'll do before every session. The easy things are setting out the books you'll need, laying out the map (if you have one), making sure your adventure notes and NPCs are easily accessible, and putting out whatever dice and figures you'll need. It also means arranging the space itself—bringing in chairs if necessary, moving things that are in the way, shifting tables and other furniture to be more convenient, drawing the blinds or opening the windows, etc. And there are the supplies, not just dice and papers and pencils but also music—you should figure out what CDs you want for that game and either put them in beforehand or at least have them sitting by the stereo so you can pop them in as needed.

More important than the physical, though, is the mental prep. Find a few minutes, after you've set out your supplies and before the players arrive, to close your eyes and just think about the game. Think about what your initial plot was, what the refinements are, where the plot is going, and how far it's gotten. Think about the characters, who they are, what they've done, and what they're planning to do next. Think about what the complications are and what events are coming up in your timeline. Get back into the mood of the game so that you can talk and act appropriately. Glance over the adventure again to refresh your memory on who the NPCs are and what they're doing.

Is this absolutely necessary? Yes! Never run a game without this mental prep time—even if you and the group are just hanging out one day and someone says,

“Hey, why don't we play?”, take a few minutes to step into another room and think about the game itself. Otherwise you'll be confused and off-balance, and it'll take you a while to get into the rhythm again. This way you'll be good to go—the plot and characters firmly in your head again, and your mind on the game.

During your prep you should plan what's going to happen in the upcoming session. That doesn't mean carving it in stone—remember that this is interactive and the players will change things. But think about what's been happening, what the results of recent actions are, what events are about to occur, and what the

**“Sit down somewhere quiet with a cup of tea (or your drink of choice), the scenario, and a pen and some scrap paper.”**

— Mark Simmons, p. 103

outcomes might be. Also think about how far you want to get that session—are you interested in having the characters leave town and start for the next location, get into a major combat, or just sit and hash out situations and plot

strategies? The more you've thought about where the game will go, the more smoothly it will run, even if it doesn't go as planned.

## Keeping Notes

One thing that's extremely useful for running a game is taking notes. Yes, we're back to doing homework again. But it's true—if you take notes as you go, life is simpler and the game works better.

Here's an easy example. I have a friend who runs a game I'm in, and it's a lot of fun. He does his prep work, has maps and NPCs, knows where he wants the plot to go—but until recently he never took notes during the game. So we'd wander into some town and meet an NPC—not important enough for him to have detailed beforehand—and he'd make up a name for the character. Fine, except that the next session, when we saw the same NPC, my friend couldn't remember what name he'd given. Fortunately for him, I always jot down the NPCs we meet, so I could tell him the name, but that threw off the game a bit, for him to consult me every time we met a familiar NPC. It also weakened his authority, since he kept looking to me for answers. Finally he started taking notes himself, and the game's much smoother now—he doesn't have to look at me

when we meet an NPC, and the game can move forward without interruption.

Some people take more notes than others. When I run a game, I jot down every NPC name and every place name I use. I also make notes when something major happens—an important NPC dies, a character reveals a secret or makes a solemn vow, anything that might affect the game later. In some games I sit down after the session and write up a full summary of what took place, everywhere the PCs went and everything they did, and also everything major the NPCs did, even if the characters never knew about it. Then, for my daily prep, I'd read the most recent notes again, to remind myself what was going on. I've had some GMs who take notes like that, minus anything secret, and then post them to the entire gaming group; this is a great way to keep everybody thinking about the game between sessions and to make sure we all remember what happened last time.

How detailed should your notes be? That's up to you. Just make sure you write down anything you think you might need later. It can be just a name and a note reminding you who that is—"Pike: head of the dockworkers." No one else needs to see your notes—even if you're going to post to the group, you can write them up in more detail when you do that. For now it's just for you, to remind you of important details. If you have a timeline, it's not a bad idea to add notes to that—check off each day as it passes, so you know when you are in the story, and write in little bits about which events did take place, which were altered, and what happened. As with the daily prep, the more clearly you remember what's already occurred and what will come from that, the more smoothly you can run the game and the more easily you'll be able to handle events.

**“On the NPC list, you can also write notes about how the NPCs know/encounter/use/are useful to the PCs.”**

— Mark Simmons, p. 104

**“...don't fall in love with the sound of your own voice.”**

## Narrative Styles

This is a very subjective area. Everyone runs a game differently, and one of the biggest differences is in narrative style. Some people prefer to narrate everything, telling the players things from their “voice on high.” So as the players ride into town you tell them the name of the town, the general layout, where the inn is located, what it's called, and who runs it. This loses a little of the feel of the game, since you're just conveying information and not bothering to do so in character, but it's quick and easy, and you can get the info out there and move on to more important things. You can narrate in an appropriate voice and tone, too, so that you still convey the feel of the game.

At the opposite end, some GMs don't like to narrate—they never just tell you anything, and they don't reveal anything unless you can learn it in character. That means you'll ride into a town and you won't know the name of the town until someone tells you in character, and you won't know where the inn is until some NPC points it out to you. This is the most immersive form of GMing, since everything takes place in character, but it can be the slowest, and it means players may not get important information quickly or easily.

Most GMs fall in the middle, of course, mixing narrative with in-character communication. Usually the basic details—the name of the town, its general layout—can be narrated as something the characters see or hear upon arrival, and then the more specific elements like where the inn stands are conveyed through interaction with NPCs. It's also common to narrate things that could take a lot of time and aren't important—it's a lot faster to say, “Your characters search for a week before finally locating the mountain trail” than to play out every day of that week.

Should you try to narrate in the style of the genre? Yes, if you think you can do so effectively. If it's high fantasy and you can do a good impression of a bard, by



all means narrate in a flowery and lyrical fashion with old-style language and grammar. But if you're afraid you'll screw it up, don't worry about it—just tell the players what they see or what happens, and move on. Some genres are hard to narrate well, and you're better off focusing on things you can do like plot and character, rather than killing yourself over a small bit of narrative.

The other big question with narrative is whether you handle it as omniscient or limited. If you're doing omniscient, it's the "narrator on high" who sees all and knows all, and you relate information to the entire group at once. If you're doing a limited narrator, you'll probably talk to each player separately, telling them things their characters see or hear but others don't. Usually the most effective way is to alternate as necessary—if the entire group crests a hill, describe the valley below to all of them, regardless of the fact that one character is currently busy fixing his bowstring, another is a few feet behind the rest of the group, and another is two feet shorter than everyone else. Ultimately they're all going to see the valley, and it's faster to just tell them all about it now. When they're separated, or if it's a small detail some might miss, take those who notice aside and tell only them about it. You can actually use this to create more mystery and more tension—take someone aside and tell him something minor, like the fact that he saw the maid carrying off a basket of dirty linens. The player will think this must be important, since you told him privately. The other players will think you said something important for the same reason. They could spend hours trying to figure out what the maid's up to, who's in that room, and how the linens got dirty, only to eventually learn that some completely unimportant guest spilled wine on the sheets and the maid was just taking them to be washed.

A word of caution on narration—don't fall in love with the sound of your own voice. Watch your players carefully whenever you're narrating, and if they start looking bored cut it short. Remember that this isn't a solo performance, it's a roleplaying game, and the players want their chance to narrate as well.

## Dialogue and Dialect

Speaking of voices, we should talk about dialogue. When you're talking as an NPC, naturally it's more effective to do so in an appropriate voice, if you can. But if you can't—if you're a guy with a deep voice, for example, and the NPC is a woman with a high-pitched voice—don't kill yourself over it. You can tell the players, "She speaks in a high-pitched, slightly nasal voice, and it grates on your nerves" and then just talk normally. It isn't worth killing yourself or ruining your throat, and if you lose your voice from trying to do the high-pitched thing you'll have to cut the session short, which

**“A game can be very well developed and rich on the narrative side and very, very simple on the technical side.”**

— Sam Chupp, p. 155

nobody wants.

Dialect is much the same way. You're running a game in Victorian London, and one of the NPCs is strictly working class. Can you do a good Cockney accent? If so, feel free to use it—yes, it will give the game more realism and set the mood more accurately. But if you can't, don't worry about it—just tell the players the NPC speaks that way and that he's hard to understand. One thing about dialect and accent is that you can sometimes shorthand it—for example, if you say "ze" instead of "the" most people realize you're doing a French accent. It may be a rotten French accent, but it gets the point across, and unless you're willing to go to a dialect coach that'll have to do.

Dialogue in general is tough to do, and one of the hard things is making it clear what's in character and what's out of character. Players have enough trouble with this because they have only one voice and yet they're two people (player and PC), but as a GM you have to be a dozen people, sometimes all at once. If you can do dialects and accents, that's a great way to distinguish between the different people you're playing. If not, you can use other vocal tricks. One of the NPCs is an older gentleman, a professor of antiquities—speak softly and a little slowly, and try to use big words. Another is a young boy—speak quickly, stumble over even medium-sized words, and act enthusiastic. Even without accents, this can convey different people. This is particularly important if you're handling more than one person in a single conversation.

# RUNNING THE GAME

It's also not a bad idea to have a hand gesture or a phrase to indicate when you're talking as yourself and not as a character or even the narrator. This can be as simple as saying "off topic" or "out of character" or making a "time out" gesture. Encourage the players to use the same phrase or signal if they're going to say anything as themselves.

This brings us to one of the GM decisions about dialogue—what do you count as "in game?" I've been in games where the GM has said "anything you say, your character says" and he means it—so if you make a rude remark about the chief of police, don't be surprised to find yourself thrown in jail. That's a bit extreme, and personally I don't like it—it dampens the mood because the players have to watch what they say all the time and can't have fun talking to one other. But it does illustrate a danger in gaming. Your players are there to have fun, as are you, and if you're busy with one or more players anyone who isn't involved may start chatting. Should you ask them to shut up? If you don't, they may distract from the scene and ruin the mood. If you do you could tick them off and make the game less fun. So what do you do? Using a time-out gesture is good, since it means people can still make asides without damaging their character, but it also means they

have to think about that and whatever they were going to say has to be worth using the gesture. Asking people to quiet down if they're being loud is fine, as is asking them to take the conversation into another room—that lets you maintain control and focus on the current scene, but doesn't stop uninvolved players from having a good time as well.

Another thing you can do is have uninvolved players take over NPCs for you. That way they're active, which is fun for them, and they get to play someone new, which is a nice change. It also frees you up a bit and makes it easier for everyone to tell who's speaking. Just don't

**“...have uninvolved players take over NPCs for you.”**

that to the players or run the risk of them not doing what's necessary. Give them smaller NPCs instead—a crotchety old man at the library, an innkeeper, a taxi driver.

give them NPCs with crucial information or actions, since you then either have to reveal

## Props

The big difference between RPG's and LARP's (live-action roleplaying) is that in a LARP you actually walk around in character, talk in character, and do everything in character, whereas in RPG's you sit and describe what your character does—you might talk in character, but you don't move around or act as your character. The same is true for the GM—in an RPG you don't really move around much, and you describe what happens instead of doing it. But that doesn't mean you can't use visual cues, and it doesn't mean you can't use visual aids—props.

Should you use props in an RPG? That's an impossible question to answer—you should if you want to and you think it will help; you shouldn't if you wouldn't be comfortable with them and they wouldn't add to the game. Ask instead what kind of props you can use. When I'm talking about props here, I'm not talking about getting a wheelchair for your legless NPC or buying a wet bar because your villain has one in

**“...don't ever let your game turn into you talking to yourself by having one of your NPCs have a long conversation with one or more of the other NPCs.”**

— Lee Gold, p. XX

his lair. This is a game, not a play, and you don't have a storage room or a prop master. All of the props I'm referring to are small and easily portable, and a lot of them are less about spending money than spending a little time and effort.

So what kind of props am I referring to? Papers, for one thing. Let's say you're running an espionage game, and the characters are all part of a covert ops team going on a mission. At the start of the game you hand them each their mission orders in little dossiers. That means getting a handful of manila folders, stenciling the name of the mission (the name of the adventure) on the tab, and inserting a few pages of information done

up to look like official documents. Maybe you've found a photo of a guy who fits your mental image of the target, so you have the photo in there as well. That didn't take you much effort or much money, but it looks cool and it really captures the flavor—it's very easy for the players to get into the idea of being spies when they're holding dossiers in their hands.

Newspapers are also great props, if your game is in a time and place where newspapers exist. You can find real articles and weave them into the plot—a story about a strange murder becomes one more link in the case your team is investigating—or you can modify articles by cutting and pasting, or you can print out a fake article and paste it into a real newspaper. Regardless of which method you use, being able to toss down a paper and have the players flip through it for clues is very cool and immersive.

If you're doing a science-fiction game, or even a modern-day one, you can use the computer. Set up a Web page for your game and put some clues or information on it—pictures of relevant people, transcripts of conversations, e-mails regarding the current situation. Then you can either have the players check the site between games or (if you're playing someplace that has a computer, or someone has a laptop with them) tell them to check the site during the game, when their characters do a Web search for more information. For that matter, if you have an answering machine you can put messages on it and have players call it during the game to "overhear" conversations or receive new orders.

You can also have more three-dimensional props. Perhaps your villain has stolen a precious gem and keeps it locked away in a small strong box. Find yourself a small lockbox and a nice big plastic gem—you can buy them both at hobby stores, and the gem you can probably find at a toy store or a costume store as well. When the characters finally locate the item, pull out the box and set it on the table. When they finally get it open, let them open the real box and find the gem inside. So what if it's obviously plastic? The point of a prop isn't to be the exact thing you're describing, it's to give them a real-life object as a point of reference—when they're

handing the gem back and forth, in their mind's eye they're seeing an incredibly rare and valuable cut stone, not some cheap toy. It's all in the presentation.

Props can also help players get into their characters. If one person is playing an older man with a limp, lend him a cane—he isn't actually walking around, but just having

the cane there to lean on will help remind him that he's limping and will give a visual to the other players as well. Don't go overboard with this—just because someone's playing a cop doesn't mean you need to give him handcuffs and a toy gun, or a policeman's hat. But if you happen to have the hat, you can offer it to him; if the character and an NPC are apprehending a suspect you can toss him a toy pair of handcuffs and say, "Right, you do the honors."

Sometimes a prop isn't worth the effort—yes, you could create a *papier-mâché* copy of the Ming vase the characters are pursuing, but it would take you days or more to finish and it'll only be in their hands for a few minutes of game time. But if it's something you have, or something you can put together easily, and you think it will add to the feel of the game, go for it.

**“One way to get everyone going the same direction is with player handouts or pregame briefings.”**

— Kenneth Hite, p. 72

## Audio Aids

When I talked about choosing a time and place I mentioned being able to play music. Not every GM likes to have music with her game—some people find it too distracting. Others like to have music on constantly as a background noise—it gives a solid background sound, and it also blocks outside noises (like the neighbors). Personally, I fall in the middle—I use music when I think it's appropriate, but I don't have it running all the time.

If you're going to use music in your game, you need to find appropriate music. Think about the genre and what sort of music fits it. You're generally better off with instrumentals, since they're less distracting—if a piece has words the listener tries to hear and understand them, which will take attention away from the game. For fantasy you're going to want either classical music or a Celtic style—pipes and fiddles and horns.

# RUNNING THE GAME



For science fiction you may want electronica, or at least electric guitar—something clearly artificial. For horror you want classical, with deep soaring notes—probably violin, bass, organ. Look at the movies you like in the genre; you might be able to use their soundtracks, or at least get some ideas from them.

You'll also want different bits of music for different types of scenes. Combat music should be active and fast-paced, but not cheerful—dramatic, powerful, and very energetic. General background music can be light or dark, depending on the mood of the game, but it shouldn't

be too vigorous or else it will distract. Music for brainstorming and strategy sessions should be slower, more thoughtful, less active.

Some GMs favor a *Peter and the Wolf* approach—

they give each major NPC a theme song, and whenever that character appears they play that piece. I think that's very cool, but it only works if you have a dozen tape players or a 20-CD changer, so you can cut to it at a moment's notice. What generally works is to have a handful of CDs in a CD changer or sitting next to your boombox—one or two for combat music, one or two for more thoughtful moments, one for general music, and one for major moments like the discovery of the murderer or the final capture of the villain. Then you can switch them in as you need them.

The key to using music is being able to do it quickly and accurately. I don't use it as often as I might like, because I find it takes me too long to grab the CD remote, fumble with the buttons until I have the right CD on, and then crank up the volume for it. I've known GMs who are absolute masters at this, though—they have the remote in hand and are setting the CD while still playing an NPC

or narrating, and you don't even notice what they're doing until the music kicks in. It's really impressive, and it does add to the game—try watching a movie and imagining it without the background score or the soundtrack and you'll see what I mean. What I would say is first see if you can find appropriate music. Don't buy it yet—just go through your own collection or borrow from friends. Then pop them into the CD and run a little practice session—pretend you're running the game, narrate a scene, and try cueing and running the right CD while doing this. If it goes smoothly, great—you can try adding music to your game. If it's awkward, takes too long, and disturbs your concentration, you're better

**“The key to using music is being able to do it quickly and accurately.”**

off without it. That doesn't mean you can't have music—you can still select a few good background CDs and just run them at low volume to provide a little mood music throughout. But don't try switching to specific

# RUNNING THE GAME

CDs for specific scenes unless you can pull it off without ruining the mood or your momentum.

## Hunger Pangs

Here's something you never read about in the games themselves, but something every GM will have to deal with—food. Unless you're playing after dinner, at some point during the game someone will suddenly say, "Man, I'm starving! Anyone want to order something?" Suddenly you've lost two hours of game time as people start discussing what they want to eat, where to order from, what to get, who should order, who should pick it up (if you're so unlucky as not to have delivery available), who owes how much, who gets change, etc. Then there's the actual getting the food, divvying it up, and eating. By the time everyone's sated, no one remembers where the game was or what they were doing, and you might as well start all over again or call it a night.

What can you do? Starving your players isn't really an option—they get cranky. You have three options:

**1. Insist that your players eat beforehand.** This might work, except that someone will wind up not getting time to eat first, or they'll eat early and be hungry again before the game is up, or the game will simply run so long that they get hungry again anyway.

**2. Prepare food.** If you have your own place you can make food beforehand, whether it's just you doing it or you get everyone to bring something. This is often cheaper than ordering, and all the prep work was done first, so it's just a matter of people showing up with the food, dishing it out, and eating. The drawback is that someone has to decide what the menu will be and coordinate who's bringing what. Otherwise you'll have five people bringing soda, three bringing chips, and you providing everything else (or there being nothing but chips and soda, in which case we're back to "in a few hours everyone's hungry again").

**3. Take care of ordering before the game starts.** As soon as people walk in, determine what you'll be ordering, hand out menus, write down orders, call it in, and collect the money. Then you can get started and play for half an hour to an hour before the food arrives. Once it shows up, you can hand it out and either take a break to eat or eat while playing. Either way, you haven't lost as much time, and if

you've all just eaten everyone should be okay through the end of the session.

It's always a good idea to have drinks and munchies on hand, just to be safe—those can stem the tide of hunger and keep people happy either until real food arrives or after the real food is a faint memory. If you're playing in a public place and don't have a fridge or a cooler, you can send someone on a drink run when he isn't in the scene.

Another option is to all go out for food after the game is over. This is a lot of fun anyway, since it gives you a chance to hang out and unwind after the game and to discuss what happened during the session. Talking about it will make everyone remember the details more clearly, so you can get back into things more quickly at the start of the next session. If everyone's getting hungry towards the end of the game, it lends a certain urgency to the characters' actions and dialogue.

One cool thing about the second option (preparing food) is that you can do "themed" food, just like themed music. If you're running a fantasy game, roast beef, leg of lamb, or meat pies fit in perfectly and seem like a medieval feast. For science fiction it's a bit trickier,



## WINNING THE GAME

but small discreet portions work well—actually, TV dinners are very much the right feel, though they aren't the most appetizing of meals. For horror, nice normal food, the kind you and your friends eat every day, like spaghetti and meatballs, will increase the solid, safe feeling, which will make the horror that much more powerful when it appears. You can also do themed food by nationality—if you're running an espionage game and the characters are in Mexico, go for enchiladas and tacos and burritos; if they're in England go for fish and chips or beef and potatoes. It does take a little extra effort to do themed food, and someone will actually have to do a main course (unless you're doing science fiction and everyone's bringing quick, small things), but it can go a long way to setting the mood. This way the time you take out to eat isn't wasted or lost—instead, when you put the plates aside and get into the game again, everyone already has some of the right feel for the period and the genre. Additionally, depending on what the scenario is that night, you might even be able to work the meal into the game itself.

## Combat—Number versus Narrative

Combat plays a large role in most adventures. It doesn't have to be “hack at the big monster” or “shoot at the enemy agents,” either—combat can be any form of direct conflict, whether that uses guns, swords, spaceships, or chess pieces. Sometimes the combat is isolated, one or two characters against one or two NPCs. Sometimes it becomes a grand melee with a dozen or more participants.

The question you have to ask yourself, as the GM, is how do you want to handle combat? There are two extremes, numbers and narrative, and you'll need to decide where you fall along the spectrum.

The numbers approach to combat is simple—you use the dice rolls and the charts and whatever else the game system requires for combat. You don't skip any of the rolls or modifiers, and you factor everything in every time—so if you're running a d20 game and you have a player with Rapid Shot, Far Shot, and Combat Reflexes

**“...you can do ‘themed’ food, just like themed music.”**

against four or five enemies entering his threat range, you let him roll his two normal attacks and his five attacks of opportunity, even if he's dealing with one-hit-die creatures who will probably fall over dead when he breathes on them. The advantage of the numbers approach is that it's accurate and very thorough. The disadvantage is that it can get very dull after the sixth or seventh roll in one turn, and a bit confusing (especially if you have several people with multiple attacks), and it can take forever if you have a large combat.

The narrative approach is also very simple—you as GM describe what happens. You ask your players what their characters are going to do during the combat, in general terms—one is firing his bow at all enemies, one is sneaking around to attack the leader from behind, one is using *magic missile* to shoot down foes, and one is simply wading in swinging a battle axe. Then you look over their stats and the stats of the enemies and you tell them the outcome—“You fight valiantly, and though the enemy is numerous they are no match for your prowess. Trefen succeeds in killing the orcs' leader from behind and their attack falters. Colwyn steps in with his axe, devastating their front ranks, while Amaril rains death down in a hail of arrows and Aswyn decimates their numbers with his mystic bolts. Finally the battle is over—all of you have taken a few scrapes and scratches, but nothing serious, and the orcs lay dead at your feet.” The advantage of this method is that it's very quick and dramatic and you can describe the combat in a way that suits the mood of the game itself. You can also tailor it a bit, so if you really want one of the orcs to get away (because he needs to alert their leader to the danger, so the army can be rallied) you can do that—since there aren't any rolls, you're free to dictate the outcome. The disadvantage is that players may feel left out, since they don't really have any say in it—if they win they probably won't complain much, but if anyone is seriously hurt they'll say they never got the chance to roll against the attack, and they're right.

I tend to use the middle ground with this (as with a lot of things—you can tell I'm a Libra). In most combat situations, I have the characters roll and I roll for their opponents, although I'll only roll once for all the minor NPCs together (the foot soldiers instead of the

## RUNNING THE GAME

generals). This way everyone gets to take an active part, and they can't blame me if they don't kill anything or they drop their weapons or they get attacked by three at once. But if the fight is completely one-sided—five well armed warriors against a single goblin, for example—

I'll just tell them what happens, since we know the outcome and it speeds things along. Likewise, if it's a big battle and the PCs are down to killing minor NPCs, well below their own levels and abilities, I'll just wrap things up and tell them they won. Who really wants to sit through an extra hour of watching the characters slaughter goblins?

The key is never to stint on important combats and important NPCs. Don't ever narrate the result of a fight with the major villain—that's way too important, and your players will scream bloody murder if you prevent them from actually playing out the combat. But if you're in a big combat and the players are beginning to look bored, feel free to shorthand encounters with inconsequential opponents, as long as you switch back for the good stuff: "You hack down several goblins in a row, your mighty axe shearing through their armor as if it were paper. Then you hear a loud bellow and you glance up—and up, and up. The figure lumbering toward you towers above its fellow creatures, its misshapen head a good foot above your own eyes, and in its enormous hands it clutches a small tree, roots and all, as if it were a club. What do you do?" The player knows this is a major foe and will appreciate the fact that you fast-forwarded to get to it—the goblins were never a challenge, but an ogre is quite another matter!

You'll need to gauge your players in terms of the combat. Some people would prefer to do every die roll themselves, and if you're okay with taking the time you should humor them. Others would rather cut to the chase, let you narrate the minor skirmishes and reach the major battles. That's fine too. It's going to be tricky if you have some of each type in your group, since you

**“In a book or television show, a character in combat doesn't stop to think, “Okay, I'll use the Two-fisted Firing combat maneuver, and I'll dive sideways to cut the penalties in half, and I'll aim for the torso to achieve a +1 to-hit bonus.”**

— Steven S. Long, p. 71

should really be consistent—you may have to do a few more die rolls than you'd like to appease the first guy, but then fast-forward a bit to appease the second guy. As long as they get a fair number of rolls but not an excessive amount, both will be reasonably happy—and if

there's a bigger fight on the way, the first guy will quickly forget that he didn't get to roll damage on all twelve goblins.

## Minutiae

Let's talk for a minute about the little things. The names of characters and locations, the geography of a region, the detail and scale of a map, exactly how much time has passed since that stranger left the bar and walked upstairs to his room—these are all details you are expected to handle as GM. Will all of them be important to the plot? That depends on your game and how you run it. Some GMs make everything important—the stranger's name being Dragovic hints at the dragon blood in his family, the town's being named Wyrnberg hearkens back to the days when it was the breeding ground of the local dragons, and the fact that the stranger left moments before sunset suggests that the legends about dragons revealing their true form at sundown are true. For other GMs, some or all of the details are important—when the stranger left may not matter, but his name might still be important; the town's name may be mere folk history, but the fact that the bar is made of an imported wood hints that someone important lived here once.

How do you determine which details matter? Well, which details interest you? It is your game, after all. Do you love genealogy? Great—work up a family history for Dragovic and drop hints about his lineage throughout several sessions. Are you really into geography? Cool—draw up a map, figure out distances and land masses and rivers, describe the terrain whenever you're setting the scene, and let some minor plot points

# WINNING THE GAME

hinge on the type of rock in the area or when the next riverboat arrives. Does astronomy fascinate you? Fantastic—have fun working out the exact ways in which the seven moons of the planet interact. This doesn't mean that you should turn the game into a geography lesson or a lecture on lineages, but let your own outside interests crop up a bit here and there. If you really like dealing with one type of detail and you put a lot of work into that area, those details will show through, and they'll give the game both a nice sense of thoroughness and a more individual flavor.

Your other guideline is your players. Does one of them constantly ask how NPCs' names are spelled and pronounced? He's probably either a genealogy buff or an etymologist. Work in a few details about the local language or come up with a history for the major NPCs' names and he'll be thrilled. Is one of your players always checking on when the stagecoach runs and when the riverboat leaves? Work up an actual schedule for them so they're consistent, then let one of them be a half-day late one time because of a strange encounter. He'll definitely notice, and he'll be happy that you rewarded his attention to those details.

Don't go overboard, of course—just because one player asks about heights and weights doesn't mean you need a chart of every person in the county, arranged in order. Don't make the same details always mean something important—if you've had a name provide a clue once or twice, have some other characters with suspicious names that don't mean anything. Keep your players guessing—if it's just the same name game each time, they'll lose interest in that because it isn't challenging anymore. And if you lovingly dwell on the hinges of every door they encounter, they'll lose patience with that as well—sure, if one of them is a carpenter he might enjoy it, but that's not worth ruining the mood for the others. You have to keep it balanced—try to find one type of detail each player likes and work that in at least once every few sessions.

**“A rough sketch is all you really need to create a working map. Don't worry if you lack artistic talents. As long as your map contains the information you need and remains readable (to you, at least), it's a good map.”**

— Ann Dupuis, p. 84

Also remember that too much detail can cloud an issue and clutter a game. If none of your players notices character names, you may need to let your genealogy charts slide, because they aren't into that and you can't force them to watch those details. Well, you can, but that isn't fun for anyone. But find a few details you and your players notice and lavish a little extra attention on those. It's a lot like a movie set—those old stand-up versions with just the front look fine when you're in the street, but the minute you step around the corner you see they're fake and it ruins the mood. If you know your viewers like to glance through the front windows and you add rooms there for them to see, the town looks that much more real, the viewers are excited, and the mood continues. It's a lot of gain for a small amount of extra work, and if it's something you like yourself it'll be fun to prepare anyway.

## Zombies and Ghosts

As I mentioned earlier, your gamers have lives of their own, and sometimes they just cannot make it to a session. That's understandable, and as long as it isn't a constant thing you shouldn't get mad about it. But it does lead to an important question—what do you do with their characters when they're not around?

One answer is to zombie them. This means the character continues to walk along with the rest of the group, and may even mumble from time to time—he can carry things and can participate to a small degree in any combat, but can't do significant damage. The character can't take major damage, either, though, so he is safe from dying or being disfigured.

Another option is to ghost the character. This is similar to zombie-ing in that the character is with the group, but he's almost immaterial—he can't carry anything beyond his own equipment, he doesn't speak, and he can't take part in any combat. This way the character is completely safe, but also completely useless.





There are other methods, of course. You can NPC the character, actually speaking and acting for the player and letting the character take full part in whatever takes place. That keeps the character more fully involved, but it also takes more effort on your part, and it will distract you from handling the plot and the regular NPCs. If you get a chance to talk with the player before the game, you can ask him what the character should be doing during the session and use that to help guide you.

You can remove the character completely. This may be innocuous—a character goes to visit his aunt, gets called in for a job interview, or is summoned by his king to take part in a joust. If that's the case, the character can return during the next game, assuming the player is back and the group is someplace where he can be reached. You can also take advantage of the player's absence to make the character into a plot point—he's kidnapped by the evil sorcerer, or taken hostage by the terrorist. Now the other PCs have to figure out where he went, what happened, and how to get him back—this can be a side plot, or it could tie back into the main plot and even provide important information. Of course, if you take this approach you'll need to be careful, since you don't want the player to come

back and find out his character's been shot. Make sure the removal is reversible—you can damage the character a little, though not much (more cosmetic than anything), but ultimately he shouldn't be much the worse for wear. It should be something that can be handled in a single session, so if the player returns for the next game he doesn't find himself sitting out the whole night because his character is still trapped in a glass box or frozen or turned into a cat.

How do you decide which method to use? I like to be fair about it and ask the player what he wants. If he has given me information about what his character will do next, I'll go with that, and if he wants the character to still be involved (and thus still at risk) I'll either NPC or zombie him. If he doesn't have anything in mind and doesn't want to risk the character's getting hurt, I'll ghost him. If he doesn't tell me anything or doesn't let me know he'll miss the game, I tend to remove him in some way that, even if it doesn't hurt him physically, will come back to haunt him later—if nothing else, the other characters might be ticked that they lost valuable time rescuing the character from his own stupidity. I'm not petty about it—I won't kill the character or maim him, or steal his most valued possession



# WATCHING YOUR GAME

(at least not permanently)—but removing him is sometimes more honest than zombieing or ghosting (would a warrior really just stand around and not get involved in a big fight?) and can give me new plot complications to play with later. This is also a great way to introduce new information—when the player returns and I take him aside to play out what happened to him, I can slip in things he overheard or saw, and when he rejoins the group he can share this new information. That’s more appropriate than my just letting the group find out from someone, and it’s a way of repaying the player for being a good sport about the whole thing.

**“Every so often, something very cool will happen—you’ll find yourself watching your game.”**

way up a hill, and then race back down the other side—on that far side, you don’t need to pedal or do much of anything beyond hang on. It’s exhilarating, that sudden rush of motion, and it’s all because you made it up to the top and over the edge. This is the same thing.

If you do get this opportunity, though, don’t waste it. Don’t wander away or stop paying attention—watch everything that goes on and try to remember everything that’s said. Why? Because, first of all, this is the characters at their most pure, just the players’ input without your manipulation. It gives you a chance to sit back and study the characters more carefully, and the better you know them the better you can adjust the adventure to fit them. Second, the players are into the scene and are talking without cues from you, which means they’re making it all up as they go. They may say something you can use later, whether it’s something new about their characters (like some background information they’d sketched out before but now actually give specific facts about) or something related to the adventure (like their own motives for being involved and their plans for whatever the group finds), and you can work that back in at some later point. They won’t be mad about it, either—actually, they’ll probably be delighted, since it shows you were paying attention and that you really do want the adventure to work for each of them in every way possible.

## Watching Your Game

Every so often, something very cool will happen—you’ll find yourself watching your game. I mean exactly that, too—you’ll suddenly realize that you haven’t said anything for several minutes or more, because you haven’t needed to give a new description, you don’t have any NPCs active, and nothing new is happening. Yet the game is moving. Your players are carrying it, running with their characters and talking and arguing among themselves. And you don’t have to do a thing.

Here’s a hint—enjoy it! Sit back and watch. This is the reward for all your hard work—you have your players so hooked on their characters and on your plot that they can sustain the story by themselves for several minutes without you needing to prod things along. It will end eventually—their conversation will flounder a bit, start to slow down, and then you’ll step back in and either an NPC will enter or speak up or something new will occur to distract them. But for that brief period, let them run with it. Don’t panic and try to exert your control—there’s nothing to be afraid of, and if you do interfere you’ll ruin it. This doesn’t mean they don’t need you anymore or anything silly like that—it just means they’re as into it as you are. It’s like when you’re riding a bike and you pedal all the

**“Players deviating from a plot can’t ruffle a gamemaster who wears a countenance of confidence, who looks like she knows what she’s doing.”**

— Jean Rabe, p. 125

Watching the game can also hint at where you should go next. If the characters are all debating what to do about the terrorist, and you’d intended him as only a side plot, you might want to give him more weight. If they’re all arguing about whether to use the blackmail information themselves, you need to make sure you’ve detailed what that information is and how the President and the government would react to a second blackmail threat—this time from their own former agents! Just pay close attention to what the characters are doing and keep it in mind as the game continues. And give yourself a pat on the back—you’ve earned it.

## Fudging Results

Here's another big tip that game books never mention but that can really make or break a game—it's okay for you to cheat. What? Am I actually condoning cheating? Well, yes—but only when it's appropriate.

Let's face it—the game ultimately isn't about rolling numbers. It's about having a good time and telling a good story. Sometimes the dice work against that.

Here's an example. Our heroes have gathered together at the dictator's mansion and have just succeeded in storming it—they've made it into the front hall, but it was harder than expected, and all of them are wounded. You have already set up the dictator's mansion, of course, complete with security measures, including a state-of-the-art laser array that crisscrosses the front hall, delivering 1d8 points of damage per laser to anyone who crosses while it's active. All the security measures are on, seeing as how the place was just assaulted, and the five characters march in. Their hacker stops at the security panel to try deactivating the laser grid. He rolls against the difficulty you've set (you didn't tell him what it was, just to roll and tell you the result)—and fails.

Now, at this point you have three choices:

1. The roll stands, he fails, and they wade into the laser grid. You roll to see who gets hit by each laser (twelve in all) and how much damage each character takes.
2. The roll still fails and they walk into the grid, but you decide who takes what damage instead of rolling it.
3. You let the roll succeed, they deactivate the laser grid, and walk past it without incident.

So why would you do either 2 or 3? Because the PCs are all injured, and one or more of them could die right here in the front hall—maybe even all of them (with twelve lasers, that's a possible 96 points of damage! Quite a bit among five characters). Is that dramatic? Not as much as their reaching the dictator and having a face-off. And it isn't satisfying—they should at least reach their enemy before expiring.

Does this mean nothing can harm them before the grand finale? Of course not—everyone controls his own character, you have other forces in play, and if someone is foolish enough to get killed early on that's his own fault. But you can modify things a bit if you feel it

will add to the story. In the example above, you can make the grid go down for a few seconds, so the hacker thinks he did it, and then when they're halfway across it kicks in—they take some damage but not as much, all of them survive the grid, and now they're really ticked! More dramatic, and you only had to fudge things a little. Or you can modify the damage results so no one actually dies, but one or two are close—they're left behind, bleeding out on the polished marble floors, and their companions swear to find the dictator and put an end to this quickly. Again, more dramatic, and you've only changed things a little.

There are two dangers to fudging results. First, your players could catch you at it, in which case they'll lose faith in the die rolls—why should they bother to roll anything if you're just going to modify results to get what you want? The way to avoid this is not to get caught. You should be using a GM screen of some sort, even if it's just a plain folder you stand up in front of you. That way they can't read your notes (and they're spared the danger of accidentally seeing something), and you can roll dice without their seeing the results. If something should require a die roll, go ahead and roll, even if you've already decided the outcome—they'll hear the roll and know you're using the dice to determine the results, so clearly you are letting random chance dictate the outcome.

The second danger is more serious. You could overdo it and start fudging more and more results, until finally you're not using the dice at all—you're simply deciding what happens in each case. That's fine—if you're writing a novel. But this is a game, and it involves random chance—the players abide by that, rolling dice to determine outcomes, and so should you. Otherwise it's just everyone sitting around and declaring what happens without any random elements—they all do exactly what they want, as well as they want, when they want. There's no risk in that, no suspense, and ultimately no fun. You should use the dice most of the time and only modify the results when it's necessary—usually only if it spells the death of a character (either a PC or a major NPC) or means the sudden and inappropriate end to a plotline.

Keep in mind that fudging can work in the characters' favor or against them. In the above example, it was very much in their favor, since otherwise some or all of them would have died in that hall. But if one of

# RUNNING THE GAME

them had somehow made it into the mansion earlier, taken a shot at the dictator, and caused just enough damage to kill him, you would have to stop and ask yourself, “Is it more dramatically effective for him to die now and chaos to ensue, or for him to just barely survive and double his guard because of it? Which will make things more fun for everyone?” The answer is probably the latter—if he dies the mission is largely over, since the PCs can use the confusion to sneak into the mansion and steal the files, while if he’s almost dead and now becomes more paranoid the mission just became more difficult, more challenging, and thus more exciting. In most cases, you’ll only be fudging by small increments—giving the character one extra hit point so he survives, lowering the difficulty by one so he succeeds. But always ask yourself if it’s better for the story—and by that I mean better for everyone’s enjoyment, not for whatever plotline you’d initially designed—to modify results a little bit.

## Holding Them Together

In the section before this, in the example, you’ll notice I mentioned that the entire group entered the hall together. This illustrates one of the toughest parts of running a game—keeping the group together. That breaks down into two aspects: interpersonal relations and teamwork.

Interpersonal relations means, bluntly, that all the characters get along. If two of them hate each other’s guts, you’re going to have a serious struggle to keep them on the same team, much less in the same room. What can you do about this? Unfortunately, not much past the initial character creation—you picked players who got along and should have vetoed any characters you knew couldn’t work with the rest of the group, so something must have developed during the adventure to drive them apart. You can use NPCs to remind the characters that they should work together, to encourage them to patch things up, and even to drop

hints that the rift is due to miscommunication or outside interference. Ultimately, it’s up to the players to work things out. Sometimes, if you have good players, their characters will hate each other but still work together, which is fine—they get to have fun with the tension, and it does add complications for you to work in, but the characters know their jobs and their responsibilities and will honor them. The problem is when someone “storms out” (in the game, not in real life) and refuses to work with the other(s) any more. Now you have to find ways to bring him back in if you’re going to keep everyone together.

The second issue, teamwork, is less about interaction than it is about attitudes toward working with others. Some people are lone wolves—they go off and do things on their own, rather than staying with the group. Sometimes that’s necessary—the scout should go off and scout around the area first, then come back and report. Other times it’s not required but it doesn’t hurt, and it does make sense—someone wants to go back and question a hostage more thoroughly, and more violently, and does it privately to avoid any arguments about torture and morality. But sometimes characters just won’t stay together—the entire group is about to assault the mansion from the front, and one of them decides to circle around the back instead. Again, what can you do? Again, the answer is “not very much.” The other players will probably help you here—they’ll point out how they should all stick together and not split off on their own, and they’ll mention that the character’s training is to obey orders. You can have NPCs mention things like this, and you can nudge the player a bit yourself by reminding him about things like military conduct and chain of command and tactical training. But ultimately, if the character wants to go off alone, he is going to do so.

**“Don’t Split the Party: Even in a game you run at home, splitting up the party is a bad idea. During a con game, it can be suicide.”**

— Matt Forbeck, p. 148

The one thing you should never do is force them to stay together. Nothing is worse than having no control over your own character, and if the Hand of Fate reaches down and makes the characters all enter together the players are just going to throw up their hands and say, “Fine, let us know what happens

# RUNNING THE GAME

when you're done." That doesn't mean you can't nudge situations a bit. Perhaps the scout starts to split off toward the back, and

one of the tanks reverses gears and backs up a pace, moving alongside the mansion and blocking off that side. If the other tank does the same on the other side, well, it is a smart tactic for them, giving them a better view of the front and assuring that they won't hit their own allies while preventing the risk of a force sliding past them and to the back. The scout can still try for the back, but now he has to get to the tank and either over or under it, without being seen and attacked. It's probably no longer a good idea. You didn't actually stop him from doing anything, and the tanks did behave in a realistic fashion, but he'll probably stay with the group now. This is different from suddenly announcing that a wall's been put up to block the sides or that a locked gate is there—the tanks make sense, but the walls or gate are clearly just to stop the scout from doing anything.

**"Sometimes the group is going to split up on its own. That's fine; you can't help that. Don't help it happen."**

— Matt Forbeck, p. 148

the other two groups to sit and wait, which is boring, and after a bit they'll start chatting or reading,

which will distract you and will also take them out of character

and out of the feel of the game. So what does a good GM do? Start out by asking each group what they're doing. Then give them each a little information—whether the door's locked, for example, and if it has a security system. Then spend some time on the first group, dealing with how they get into the room and what they see. Now put them on pause for a second and ask the second and third group what they're doing. Give all three groups each a little more info and then spend a little time on the second group. Then pause, check on all three, ask what each is doing next, and go to the third group. Keep doing this until they're all back together.

Think of cooking as an analogy for this. You're making a nice dinner, and you have three things to cook—the main course, the sauce, and the side dish. You could do the main course first and then move on to the sauce and then the side dish, but by the time the side dish is done the main course is cold. Or you can set all three going at once, check to make sure they're doing okay, and then concentrate on the main course for a little while—get it to a good spot, check on the other two, and so on. This way you get them all done more quickly, and none of them is cold or overcooked or forgotten.

The key is to stir each one on a regular basis—never go too long without asking the other groups what they're doing. But don't get sucked in—some players will try

to give you a detailed answer (instead of "I'm deactivating the alarm" they'll

**"...never go too long without asking the other groups what they're doing."**

## Split Focus

What if the characters do split up? That's not automatically a bad thing—sometimes it's even the smart thing to do, separating so each can check a door along the hall instead of checking every door as a group, or dividing into smaller teams to check rooms so that the whole building can be swept more quickly. You can't fault their logic, and you don't really have a reason to keep them together at this point, so they divide up. Now you have to deal with that.

How do you handle it? You have three teams of two, instead of one group of six, and each team is doing something different. Here's the difference between a passable GM and a good GM. A passable GM will take each group in turn, working with them and going over where they are and what they're doing. That's nice and simple, and makes sure you aren't forgetting anyone—it also allows you to focus on each group in turn, so you aren't distracted and don't lapse on the details. But it leaves

launch into "I deactivate the alarm, kick open the door, and roll inside, gun at the ready. What do I see?") in order to make you focus on them. Just get the basics and then put them on hold—in the above example, once he's rolled into the room tell him, "The room is empty except for—I'll get to that in a minute," and go back to the other group. You can actually build suspense this way, almost telling them something interesting but stop-

# WINNING THE GAME

ping just before that, and everyone is still in the game, impatiently waiting for their turns. Because you might jump at any time, no one wanders off—they want to be ready when you do turn to them, because they’ll only have a few minutes before you move on to the next group again.

You can also play tricks on your players with this method. Let’s say we have those three teams, all checking rooms. The first group gets to a door and finds it’s locked—there’s a small security panel next to it. The second group also has a locked door with a security panel. The third group has a locked door, sees the panel next to it, and reaches for it as well—“The panel swivels open as you touch it,” you tell them, “revealing a second, more complicated panel underneath. Think about what you’re going to do next,” and you move back to the first group. They’d assumed the panels were the same because they’d heard about the first two, and now they have to wait to find out what this means. If you’d done each group in turn, by the time you made it to the third group they’d have forgotten about the panels, and it wouldn’t be as surprising or as exciting. And what if the three rooms all end in a fourth room that links the three back together? You get the first group through the far door, tell them, “As you step through, you notice you’re in a large, circular room with several other doors—and one of them is opening!” and move on to the second group. Who is charging in through that other door? The second group, of course, since you can guess they’ll go through their door as well, but the first team won’t know that for certain until you get back to them, and in the meantime their minds are racing with all sorts of possibilities. That’s much more inter-

esting than letting each group go through in turn and then the first one having to stand there and wait for everyone else to finish.

## Asides

Sometimes you have something for just one character—he is doing something away from the rest of the group, notices something the others don’t catch, or is remembering something no one else should know about. You could blurt it out in front of everyone, but that’s not a good idea—even with good players, the kind who can separate character knowledge and player knowledge, if you say something in front of them they might slip up and use it or react to it in game.

So you take the player aside and handle it privately. It’s important to have someplace you can do this—if you’re in an apartment or a house you probably have other rooms, but if not you might have to use a hallway or even the far corner of the room you’re playing in. It’s okay to take a player aside, as long as you don’t overdo it. As with splitting the team, above, you need to remember that the rest of the group is waiting, and if you’re gone too long they’ll start to get bored and to lose interest. It’s also harder to

**“Asides are just that—they aren’t the main action, and so they should take a back seat to the primary events.”**

run back and forth with this, because you’re physically separate—you’d literally have to run back and forth, and being out of breath makes it harder to run a game well. Just keep the aside short—if it is running long, find a spot where the character is pondering what to do and use that pause to go back and give the rest something to do in the meantime.



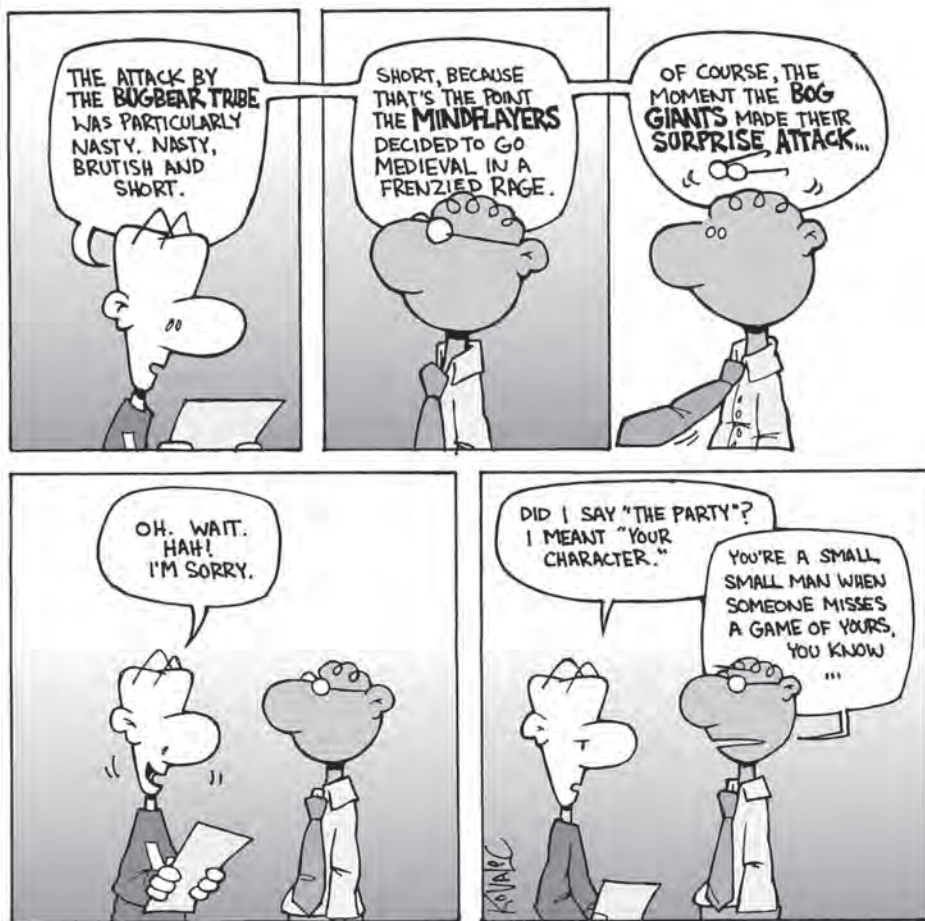
RUNNING THE GAME

One danger of asides is that they can break up the flow of the game. You're in a tense situation, the team is about to confront the dictator, and only one of the characters notices the terrorist sneaking away down a side passage. He goes to pursue him—and you're stuck. Do you take him aside and deal with that now? No, because this is the big scene and you don't want to lose the momentum you've been building here. So you let him chase the terrorist, tell him to hang out, and deal with the dictator—then, once that's at a good pausing point, you take him aside to handle the terrorist. Asides are just that—they aren't the main action, and so they should take a back seat to the primary events.

Another danger of asides is that players may abuse them. I once had a player who, when I'd ask him what he was doing, would always reply with something like, "Rob is experimenting with his new abilities, trying to find new ways to use them. I've got a whole list, and you can tell me what works and what doesn't," and he'd already be starting to stand so that we could go into the other room and handle it privately. How do you deal with a player like that, one who constantly wants private attention? You don't give in. This is your game, and you call the shots. Tell him, "Okay, hold on—I'm dealing with this right now," and make him wait until you're at a point where you can pause, or say, "Fine, just give me the list and I'll write down what works and what doesn't—if you've still got questions after that we can talk." This doesn't mean players don't have a right to take you aside—it's their game too—but they need to respect everyone else, and you, and not drag you off at every opportunity for long and involved discussions that don't need to take place. If you let them get away with this, it weakens your authority as the GM, and it also annoys the other players—some of them

may start pulling this as well, and the rest won't be into the game as much because it's constantly disrupted and the flow and mood are shot.

You can also use asides to your advantage. The characters enter a bar, blinking as their eyes adjust to the dim interior, and look around for their contact—and you take one of them aside for a moment. "The place seems familiar to you," you mention, "and after a moment you realize that it's laid out exactly like the bar you used to frequent in Buenos Aires." The other players saw you pull him aside, of course, and think something important is going on—maybe he spotted their contact! You've increased the tension of the moment, just by pulling him aside for a second. Don't overuse this—if you do it too often the players will get used to it, and they won't jump at every aside—and don't waste it, either. In the bar situation, perhaps someone attacks the place and the character is able to get the group to safety because his old bar had a trap door under the back corner table, and this place is set up the same way. Or he figures out that the contact is in a secret room



# RUNNING THE GAME

and knows where the entrance is and how to get in. Always have a reason for the aside—it doesn't have to be immediately useful, as long as it does have some value in the end.

## Notes

What about the time-honored tradition of passing notes? Every school kid is familiar with this, and many games use it as well—instead of taking the player aside you hand him a note telling him about the bar. Is this a good thing?

It can be. Notes are a quick and easy way to convey information to just one person. You have to be able to write quickly, while talking, and the player has to be responsible enough not to let others read the note, but if both of those are true you can certainly use notes. They can save you from having too many asides, since if it's a single bit of information you can probably write a note instead, and that can keep the game moving more smoothly.

So what are the downsides? Well, there's the danger I already mentioned, of the player just handing the note to others once he's read it—that ruins the whole point of a private note. There's the risk that the note will require explanation, in which case you should just take the player aside to start with, otherwise you have to answer questions without revealing anything to the other players. But the biggest risk with notes is that they might become a trend. You pass notes to some of the players, and they pass notes back to you when they're doing something they don't want the other players to know about. Then you pass back a note telling them what happens. Then one player passes a note to another player. Then two others exchange notes. Soon there's a flurry of little pieces of paper going everywhere, and no one can tell where the story is because they're all too busy reading and writing. The entire mood is shot, and you have wait until the notetaking is done before you can get things moving again.

The key, as with so many things, is to assert your control early on. Lay down the rules—you can pass notes, and people can pass notes to you but not to each other. Or they can pass only three notes per session, to whomever they choose. Or whatever you're comfortable with and think won't disrupt the game. If it takes more than a minute to write, you shouldn't be using a

note—take the person aside. If it's going to generate a slew of questions, take the person aside. If it can be said in the open, do so, and encourage everyone else to do the same—point out that too many notes will slow the game down and become distracting for everyone.

Of course, if used wisely, notes can do the same thing as asides, not just conveying information but also building tension. Why did that one player get a note just now? What does he know that no one else does? Is it important—and is he going to share? As with asides, don't waste it—never pass a note that just says “hi!” or “look surprised” when you can have one that says “The woman at the bar is an old friend” or “The man who just passed you—was that Claude? But you thought he was dead!” And don't write notes about unimportant things, because that encourages the players to do the same. Save them for tidbits that have some use or significance and that only the player in question should receive.

## Interests—Party versus Personal

One danger in any game is personal interests. I'm talking about characters here, not players. Every character has a unique personality, a history and background, and personal attitudes and interests. That's a good thing, because it makes the game more exciting when the players get into the characters and really develop them. But personal interests can become a distraction and can drain time from the group as a whole and from the actual adventure.

Here's an example. Years ago, I was in a game where one of the other players had developed a character with an entire backstory. So had I, of course, but his character had something mine didn't—a dependent love interest, a woman he was responsible for. The GM thought this was great, since it gave more depth to the character, and he and the player would roleplay the character's visits with this woman. But as the game progressed those visits got longer and longer, until sometimes the rest of us would be sitting for an hour or more while the two of them detailed an encounter. This was a personal interest at its worst.

As a GM, you have to put your foot down sometimes. The above is one of those times. If the player



wants to have an NPC for his character, great, and it's okay to do small asides with the NPC from time to time, but don't let those get out of hand and don't let them distract from the main story. This is like any aside, except that the player may try to push it, pointing out that you allowed the NPC from the start and so he should get to play with that. Just remind him that the NPC is exactly that—a nonplayer character, a minor role in the story—and that spending too much time on this NPC will diminish the story as a whole, including the character's part in it. Narrate encounters instead of roleplaying all of them, or offer to run them separately so they don't take time away from the regular sessions. If the player is really into writing, let him write up the encounters, as long as you have veto power—that way you can stop anything which could interfere with the plot (like the PC deciding to bring the NPC along on a covert op into the war-torn jungle)—but the player can indulge his character a bit and no one else has to suffer for it.

The other issue with personal interests is when they conflict with party interests. The group wants to go after the terrorist and crush his organization for good, but one of the characters has a dark secret—he was once part of that organization, and he swore never to participate in any attempt to destroy or discredit it. This may not be a bad thing for the game—it creates more tension among the characters, as they argue over what to do next. But you should have made sure, from character creation, that no one had a personal interest which would shatter the group. In this case, the terrorist isn't the objective—he's just a side issue, and if the dictator is dead and the files recovered and the switch deactivated, the rest of the group will probably be satisfied to let the terrorist go—for now. But if one of the group had made a similar vow to the dictator, he should never have been on this mission, because his presence could undermine the entire operation.

You just have to keep a close eye on the characters' interests and keep them in check. If someone suddenly

announces that his character has an overwhelming interest in revolutions and insists that the group stay and help the revolutionaries instead of attacking the dictator, you can veto this—if it wasn't part of the character from the start, he doesn't have it, or it's only a minor interest and not enough to make him disobey the mission orders. If someone does put down that interest during character creation and you allow it, you should tailor your adventure so that it won't be a problem (perhaps removing the revolutionaries entirely, or having them all get killed, so the character is now more motivated to destroy the dictator). Don't let your players push you around or exaggerate their interests to force you into something—you should already know their characters and how strong each interest is, and you can call them on it if they go over the line.

## Power Levels

One of the worst things for a player is to be in a game and to suddenly realize that there's no way in Hell you and your group can defeat the big baddie. Why? Because he's simply too strong for you. You just don't have what it takes to go up against him—it's like pitting a bicycle against an eighteen-wheeler in a tug-of-war. If that happens (the characters, not the tug-of-war) you've failed one of your primary duties as a GM—keeping

**“The villains need to challenge your PCs. By that, I mean that RPG villains should be powerful foes that are difficult to defeat.”**

— John R. Phythyon, Jr., p. 79

the power levels balanced.

Does this mean the villain can't be powerful? Of course not—who wants a weak villain? Don't let the players fool you; they don't want this either. If the villain's too weak there's no challenge in beating him and thus no fun, no sense of accomplishment. So, yes, the bad guy should be powerful. But not too powerful. The PCs have to stand a chance against him.

Here's how to determine if the power levels are balanced. Take a look at your major NPC villains and then think about what will happen when one of them goes up against the PCs. First of all, will they all be attacking at once, or will this be a one-on-one duel? It's fine for the NPC to be stronger than any one or two of the

# WINNING THE GAME

PCs if they're to attack him in a group. Second, what arena will the conflict be in—physical, mental, social, magical? The fact that the NPC can crush granite with his bare hands isn't a big deal if the final conflict is a chess game. How long will it take for the players to get to this point? You have to take that into account—of course 1st-level characters don't stand a chance against a 10th-level fighter-wizard, but if they're all 3rd or 4th level by the time they encounter him, that's another matter. Adjust their stats in your head to account for added experience. Now compare them to the NPC in question. Are they a reasonable match? If the answer is no, you'll need to adjust the NPC's stats and abilities (whether up or down) until they are matched. You want the outcome of the fight to be in question, after all—it could go either way.

Don't rely on other NPCs, either—just because your “good guy” NPC is a match for your “bad guy” NPC doesn't mean it's balanced. The final battle shouldn't be fought by two NPCs—if it is, you're writing a novel. It has to be the PCs at the center, and if one of their allies is that much more powerful than they are, it's not really their fight. Don't try to trick or cheat the players on this—they'll know if they've been sidelined. If you do have immensely powerful NPCs on both sides, make that a side battle and make the PCs' struggle the critical conflict. Perhaps the gods themselves have entered the fray, and the heroes' god is battling the demons' lord, but ultimately the fate of the world hangs on who wins the mystic key, the PCs or the renegade sorcerer they've been pursuing. Now you have NPCs who are far more powerful than the PCs themselves, but the PCs don't have to encounter them—and even if their god beats the demon lord, if the sorcerer gets the key it's all over, so the PCs are still central to the struggle and to the outcome.

## Experience

As your game progresses, your characters will gain experience and they'll get better at various things, from skills to feats to actual physical and mental traits. This is reflected in experience points—most game systems have them, and at the end of each session or adventure you hand them out. The players then use those points

to boost their characters, making them stronger and more competent.

The first question is when you give out the points. Do you hand out experience at the end of every session

or wait until the end of the adventure? I favor session, myself—it's actually more realistic, since otherwise the char-

**“...how much experience should you give on average? That's really going to depend on the style of your game.”**

acters could go for months without ever improving at anything. And it's a bit of instant gratification for the players—“You've been good and made it through the session; here's a reward.” Plus, honestly, it's less of a headache—if you only give experience at the end of the adventure you have to keep track of what each player has, but if you give it out at each session it's their responsibility to write down their current totals.

One thing you need to worry about here is your baseline—how much experience should you give on average? That's really going to depend on the style of your game. Are you playing a power game, where it's all about big nasties attacking and each fight being ten times harder than the last one? You should give enough experience for people to raise something every session—they'll need it. Is your game a more sedate and cerebral adventure, where whole sessions are spent puzzling over details and creating hypotheses and plans of action? Experience is less important; characters shouldn't be raising abilities very quickly. It's also a matter of verisimilitude—if you've just picked up a sword for the first time this morning, but you've already had to fight off three orcs, you've either learned the basics of swordplay or you're littering a field somewhere. If you have to fight orcs every day for a week and you survive it, you are at least competent with that long sharp thingie in your hand. So if the game has a lot of activity and the characters are constantly using abilities and skills to survive, they're going to improve more quickly than if they spend days sitting in a gentleman's club reading papers and discussing world events.

Once you have a baseline, you need to worry about fairness. Everyone who shows up to the game and participates should get the basic amount for the session,

but some people are going to do more than others—they do more character development, they're more active, they get more involved. Should they get more experience? Yes. It's one of the benefits of getting involved, or perhaps it's just a way of acknowledging that involvement (since the real benefits are having more fun and being more integral to the story). At the same time you don't want to upset your players, and some people will sulk if they don't get as many experience points as others. You have to balance that when you hand them out—think about who your players are, how they'll react, and what will keep the party happy. Don't be overly generous, though—they'll love you if you give them each enough to raise every ability and skill, but the following week they'll discover that either nothing is strong enough to present a challenge any more, or that they're facing gods and cosmic entities.

Your job doesn't end after you've given out the points. Now you have to work with the players as they apply those points. Make sure they tell you or show you what they're going to improve and that they don't do anything without your approval. Why? Two reasons. First, some players will raise things without any concern for realism. How does a man who's spent the last week counting beans go from knowing what a sword is to being a master swordsman? Answer: He doesn't. But a player may want to put three points into Melee because he thinks it could be useful. Yes, it could be, but it's unrealistic, and you shouldn't allow it. It's usually a good idea to say that they can't raise anything by more than one rank/level/point per session; that keeps them from doing those sudden jumps. I don't let players raise anything they haven't used during that session, so if they've been waving a sword around they can raise Melee but if they haven't touched a map all session I won't let them up their Cartography skill.

The second reason for you to oversee experience is power levels. Remember I talked about NPCs and PCs, above? The same applies to PCs and PCs. One of the worst things for a gamer is to look over at another character and realize that character's better than yours in every way, at everything—and not by a little bit. When you had them create characters, you started them all

off with the same levels or points, so they're reasonably equal—some are better at one thing, some at others, but everyone should have something they're really good at, and ultimately they're all on a par. If they're all still in the group and all progressing together, this should stay that way—no one should shoot up past the others in strength and power. That means that sometimes you'll have to veto an increase if it makes the character too powerful—usually these are things that require years of training, so you can justify it that way. It can also be a problem if one of your players has missed several games. He's behind on experience points, so his character is going to be weaker than the others, but you don't want the difference to get so large that his character becomes useless. In a situation like this, talk to the player—maybe you can work with him a little on the side, bring him back up to speed through a side adventure or some such (especially if you removed the character from the group).

In some games, experience is handled a little differently—you do give out experience, but instead of letting the players spend the points you do it for them. This is interesting and can be a lot of fun—they don't

**“Many players love nonmaterial rewards, because they often set their characters apart from others.”**

— Steven Marsh, p. 138

know what they've improved at until the start of the next game, when you hand back character sheets with the skills and abilities already raised. This method is particularly appropriate if you're running a self-discovery game, where the characters are learning more

about themselves and their abilities as they go—the players might not know what to ask for, but you know what's available and so you can give them abilities they didn't realize they had before. You have to be fair if you're doing this, though. First of all, don't fudge on this—actually assign points to people and keep track of how much you've spent on each character. Second, don't give them an ability or skill because you think it'd be neat—it has to be something the character has used or is trying to learn. Third, don't be petty—if a character has been working toward something, some skill or ability, he has the points for it now, and you don't have any real reason to deny him, you should let him have it, even if you don't want him to or it could cause problems for your plot. If it's really out of line,

# ADDING A NEW CHARACTER TO THE GAME

you can say he didn't have access to it, but if it's something he really could have learned you should let him do it. The players will only enjoy this form of experience assignment as long as they feel they're getting what they want and deserve.

## Adding New Characters

Groups of characters are like any other real-life group in that they're variable. Usually there's a central core, people who are always there, and others who come and go from time to time. In gaming, this means that the group may gain a new character or two.

New characters occur in two different ways. First, one of your existing players creates a new character, either in addition to his current character or to replace that character. Second, a new player joins and creates a character. In some ways the second situation is easier, because you don't have to worry about the new player bringing in player knowledge. He hasn't been in your game before, so he'll only know what you tell him at that point. On the other hand, the player who's already been there knows how you run and has a feel for the game, so he can more easily create a new character to fit in.

The real question with a new character isn't what to tell him (although that is important). The real questions are where he should start and how to bring him in. By "where he should start" I'm not talking about geography, but about power levels. Do you bring in a new character at first level, the way the others did theirs? Or do you bring him in at the same level as the current characters? The first way, the new player has to go through everything the others did, so you aren't playing any favorites. The second way, the new character is more of a match for the others, so he won't feel like a fifth wheel or a sidekick and he can actually hold his own and help the group.

The answer to this depends upon where you are in the adventure. If you're still near

the start and the characters have not progressed much, bring the new character in at the beginning level—it's more fair to the others, and he's not so far behind as to be ineffectual. But if you've gone a good way into the adventure, having a new character at beginning level isn't going to work—he's either going to get killed in the first fight because he's completely outclassed, or he's just going to sit around watching everyone else do everything and be completely bored (both in and out of character). Your best bet is a compromise—bring the new character in a little below the others, so they don't feel cheated ("Hey, it took us two months to get to here, and now he just comes in like that?"), but so he can contribute to the whole. With weapons and equipment I'd be a little more strict—if your group has gone from 1st level to 5th level and has gained magic weapons all around, you can bring the new guy in at 4th level but he shouldn't get a magic weapon. That he really does need to earn.

How do you bring the new guy in? It's going to depend heavily on the type of game you're running. If you're doing an espionage game, it's easy—the new



character arrives with additional mission orders that state that he's now part of the team. Case closed. If the group is traveling, it's simple enough to run into the new character. Perhaps the new character is in trouble and the group rescues him—now they feel responsible, so they bring him along. Perhaps they need a local guide and he's the one they hire. You and the player should find something about the character that's useful, something no one else in the group can provide—he can drive a tank and they need that to get inside, or he's an expert on poisons and they just found out the dictator has poison in his deadman's device. Don't be too cheesy about it, though—

how likely is it that the group will stop off in some local bar and just happen to find an American

CIA agent who's good with poisons? The meeting has to be believable; don't force the players to take the new character just because he's a PC. One way around a lot of this is to use an existing NPC. Perhaps you've already introduced an NPC who's a tank driver and he's been instructed to help the group out. All they know about him is his name and that he can drive a tank. If your player wants to be a tank driver, ask him to take over the NPC. As long as he keeps the name, any description you've given, and the tank-driving skill, he can do as he likes with the character—perhaps it turns out he's American and was stuck here after a failed op a few years back. The other characters already know him, so it's an easy transition from established NPC to PC.

Another way is to go back to the bit about links within the group. Maybe the new guy had the same drill sergeant as one of the others. Now the established character can tell the group, "Hell, if he survived Sergeant Arcon he's got to be okay!" Naturally the new character will have to work at it before the group fully accepts him, but that's fine—it can actually add to the game, because the group has shifted a bit and they all have to adjust. Just be sure he has something to offer the team and avoid anything that will prevent his bonding with the group (like that earlier promise to the dictator). Try to work in a few possible links so that they can come up later and give him another in with somebody in the party.

**The real question is less how they meet than why should they accept this new addition.**

## Modifying Characters

Sometimes people change. It's part of life—their interests shift, and their activities alter as a result. And it can happen with characters.

Often, what happens is that a player created a character for your game based on the little bit you told the group. He plays that character for a while but isn't really happy with it—it doesn't quite fit in, either in the group or in the adventure. He doesn't want to start fresh, but he doesn't want to keep things as they are, either.

Time to change the character.

Does this mean you're a bad GM? Not at all. It happens. You could tell the group only so much beforehand, and their characters were based on that. Now they've had time to get the feel for the game and for the other characters, and they want to fit in more tightly. If anything, it's a good thing, because the player wants to get more out of the game by doing some modifications on his end.

How much should you let him change the character? That depends on the circumstances. In a real-world game like espionage or maybe horror, most of his details will stay the same—basic appearance, basic build, current skills and abilities. But attitude can certainly shift, and so can interests—maybe the hacker discovers he's fascinated by tanks and starts learning how to drive and repair them. Occupations can shift, particularly if the character has the skills for the new occupation. Choice of weapons, choice of clothing, mannerisms—these can change without any real consultation.

In some games you can let the player change a good deal more. In fantasy, for example, magic can alter someone's appearance and abilities. In a superhero game, it's almost expected that some character will gain completely new powers and probably need a new name and a new costume.

Then there are active alterations. In a science-fiction game, cybernetics can change almost everything—appearance, mannerisms, stats, abilities, skills. In any game, damage can change stats and even skills—being injured can lower physical stats and reduce or remove some abilities, but the character will start to work on ways to compensate, which could include improving mental stats and adding new skills.

# WINNING THE GAME

Look where the game is. Has something happened that could cause such changes? Did the character pass through a cosmic ray storm, handle a strange glowing rock, or receive a blessing from a powerful god? On a more human level, did someone close to the character just die, or did the character discover he had been lied to by his superiors for the last few years? All of these could trigger changes. If none of these have happened, they still can—talk to the player and work out some event to account for the changes.

It can actually be a way to liven things up in the group again if the characters are getting too comfortable with one another—suddenly something happens and one of their team is acting completely differently, and they all have to adjust. Plus, if something they encountered affected one of them, what’s to say the rest of them aren’t also affected? This is both an opportunity for others to alter their characters and a way to put them all on edge. As with everything, maintain control and keep things balanced—if someone wants to go from a mildmannered physicist to a hulking man-monster, and the game is all about subtlety and intrigue and believable characters, the answer is no.

## Killing Characters

Sad but true—sometimes characters die. When I mentioned fudging results I talked about character death as one reason to fudge, but that doesn’t work all the time—if some normal person is hit point-blank by a bazooka, nothing short of outright lies or divine providence can save him. A character usually dies for one of four reasons:

- He did something incredibly stupid, like stepping in front of a bazooka, and you cannot justify saving him.
- He was in a fight and lost.
- He was in the wrong place at the wrong time (like right next to a bomb when it went off).
- The player wants to kill the character, either to start a new one or to leave the game.

If it’s the last one, don’t worry about it—that was the player’s choice, so you know he’s fine with it. But if it’s one of the first three, things can get a little rough.

First, you may have to deal with accusations of malice—“You set that bomb to blow up when he was next to it!” or “You deliberately aimed that bazooka at him!” Players can get very attached to their characters, and they may take the death personally. If you’ve been fair about things and have not deliberately killed the character,

just say so. Usually your other players will back you up—they saw the whole thing, and you didn’t do anything deliberately, and who’s stupid enough to step in front of a bazooka, anyway?

Second, you may be accused of altering results against the character, increasing the damage to make sure the character died. Again, just assure the player that you did no such thing and that you followed the die rolls properly and added up the damage fairly. Assuming this is true, you can even show him the die roll and the damage tally to prove your innocence.

Third, you may be accused of favoritism. “He was on the same floor as me—why didn’t the bomb kill him?” Again, if you have been fair about it, you can tell him so—the other character probably did get hurt, he just wasn’t quite as close and so didn’t take as much damage.

Ultimately, if you do kill a character, be prepared for the player to be upset. It happens. And the more into the game and the character he was, the more upset he’ll be.

Does this mean you shouldn’t ever kill a character? That’s up to you, of course, but I’d say no. If you run the kind of game where the characters cannot die, then they’re never at any real risk, and it loses its edge. And if the characters can in theory die (*i.e.*, if they aren’t immortal and invulnerable), then it’s possible for them to die in the game. You should never kill a character out of hand, of course—it’s a major event, and you should seriously think about it before doing it, even if that just means debating whether to go with the damage tally or not. But you are justified in killing a char-

**“A crucial part of the character design process is that it not be a finite process. Adding to a character should be continued throughout the campaign.”**

— Ross Winn, p. 107

acter if he did something that would cause that much damage. If he did something stupid to cause it, or took so much damage he cannot survive, you're really obligated to kill him. Otherwise the other players won't trust you any more, because they'll know you can't go through with it, and again you've lost the edge of the game and the tension.

So what happens when a character dies? Well, it will put a damper on the game, at least for a little while. The characters have probably gotten close, and now one of them is gone—you can't expect them to continue singing and laughing while their friend's remains are carted off. This does increase the drama of the game, though, and reminds players of the stakes, so it isn't a bad thing. They'll realize their characters could die too, which makes the characters more valuable to them.

In-game, there will be repercussions. Perhaps the characters have to answer to their superiors or to a board of inquiry, and certainly they will either have to shuffle responsibilities or find a replacement. Plans have to be redrawn, supplies redistributed, and marching order redetermined—it's a powerful moment when the characters all turn and glance at the spot where their friend should be and realize that he isn't coming back.

There are also repercussions out of game. If you're lucky, the player will sulk a bit and then get over it and create a new character. If you're not lucky, he'll be an-

gry, not just with you but with the other players, as if they somehow let him die. Tempers could flare and the group could fragment. You need to hold them together. Take the player aside and talk to him—apologize for what happened, point out that it had to happen if the game is to have any consistency and risk, and ask him what he wants to do next. Tell him you definitely want



# WINNING THE GAME

him to stay in the group (see “Taking People Out” if this isn’t the case) and talk about the options. Is this a game where characters can come back to life? Maybe you can do that—it might involve a quest on the part of the group or some private gaming with the player, and the character might not be exactly the same, but it can work (and it gives the player a chance to modify his character if he wants). If that isn’t an option, talk about creating a new character. Try to keep the player interested and thinking about the game, and looking forward to coming back in. In the meantime, you can offer to let the player take over some of your NPCs—that way he’s still involved and present while he’s deciding how to come back in.

Just remember that, unless you’re playing a particular kind of humorous game, the death of a character should be a very serious and dramatic event. It isn’t something that happens often, and it shouldn’t be ignored or glossed over. Let the players feel the weight of it, but at the same time have things continue to happen in the game, to remind them that life goes on for the rest of them and that keeping busy is often the best way to cope with the situation.

## Cheating?

I’ve talked about fudging your results a bit for the sake of the game. But what about when a player does it? That’s not fudging results—it’s cheating.

Here’s a little tip—a lot of people cheat. Most players cheat every once in a while—someone botches his roll three times in a row, he’s frustrated, he botches yet again, and so he lies and claims he failed but didn’t botch. Can you blame him? He didn’t make it a success, he just couldn’t deal with a fourth botch in a row. When that sort of thing happens, it’s usually best to let it slide. After all, the whole

point is to have fun, and how much fun is it if you botch constantly or fail every time? I’ve seen GMs actually take pity on a player and tell him, “Reroll that one, it didn’t count” or “I didn’t see that botch—roll it again.”

Done sparingly, it will only increase your group’s respect for you, and their enjoyment, because they see that you’re more interested in their having fun than you are in being an absolute stickler for the rules and the rolls.

Then there are other players, ones who don’t cheat every so often. These players cheat all the time. Every roll is a success, no matter what. That’s simply impossible—statistically speaking, everyone is going to screw up some of the time. So you know they’re cheating. Some of them are even obvious about it, because they cheat badly—every roll isn’t just a success, it’s always a critical success. The worst I ever saw was a guy in a game where the system involved pulling marbles from a bag two at a time—the color determined how well you did. He would hold the bag and look into it while he felt around, until he found the “high” colors and could pull them out.

So how do you deal with that? You can try the subtle approach first—with the guy in question, the GM took to holding the bag for him (and for everyone else, so it didn’t look like she was picking on him specifically) and holding it up at arm’s length so he had to reach up to draw. That way he couldn’t peek in and find the high colors. If someone’s rolling and concealing his dice, make sure to move things out of the way so you can see everyone’s die rolls; again, do this with everyone, so you aren’t accused of favoritism. That may be enough—some players only cheat because they can get away with it (or think they can), and if you make that harder they’ll give up and roll honestly.

What if they don’t? Some people just can’t handle taking the chance—they’re so desperate to do well they’ll cheat anyway, even if it’s obvious. If that’s the case, you have to talk to the person about it. Take him aside—do NOT do this in front of the others. Tell him that you’ve noticed his die rolls are always high and always

successful, and that doesn’t seem possible. Ask him if he’s rolling the dice honestly. Remind him that roleplaying isn’t a win-or-lose game—even if you screw up one roll, the game goes on. It’s about getting into

**Try to get the player to realize that character is the important thing here, not dice, and that no one will think less of him if he fails a roll from time to time.**



the character and the story and having fun, not about making any one roll or even all the rolls together. If you've already talked to him or tried removing the obstacles and he's still cheating, tell him that you know he's cheating and that he needs to stop. Point out that cheating ruins it for everyone—the other players don't appreciate it, since it makes their honest rolls and their honest successes less important, and it makes the player's own results meaningless because they weren't arrived at honestly and randomly. Try to get the player to realize that character is the important thing here, not dice, and that no one will think less of him if he fails a roll from time to time. Quite the opposite, actually—players band together in adversity, and they're never as supportive as when one of their own gets a bad roll or a bad bit of luck.

## Taking People Out

Sometimes nothing works. A player is cheating and won't stop. He's constantly going against the group, contradicting every plan, destroying every attempt at teamwork. Or he just isn't into it—he doesn't participate, doesn't get involved, doesn't add anything to the game. It's a shame, it really is, but you can't let it go on. This sort of thing puts everyone out—all it takes is one player who doesn't want to be there and the whole group vibe is affected, until everyone's depressed and not having any fun. The odd man out has to go.

How do you do it? As with cheating, you take the person aside—best-case scenario, you call him up and talk to him some time when you aren't gaming. Ask him if he's having a good time, if he's enjoying the game, if it's working out for him. Maybe he'll just admit that it isn't. If not, you'll need to push a little. Mention that he doesn't seem to be fitting in with the rest of the group and ask what's up. Maybe he's just having a hard time right now—remember early on where I mentioned that players have lives too? But if nothing is helping, you'll need to tell him. Explain that he doesn't seem to fit in, that it just isn't working out, and that you'd prefer if he stepped out of the game. You need to make it clear that this isn't "I hate you, get out of my game"—this could be one of your best friends. It's not



anything personal, not with you and maybe not with the rest of the group either. Sometimes the group dynamic just isn't there. Explain that—point out that some people just don't do well with some games or with some adventures. If you're strong enough, admit that some of it could be your own fault—maybe the way you built the adventure just doesn't work for him. But it's better for everyone if he steps down from the game, before people do get upset with each other and friendships are damaged.

I'll tell you a secret here. A friend once did this to me. I was in his game, and it just wasn't working out, so he e-mailed me with some concerns and asked me to step down. And I did. No hard feelings, either—his GMing style and my playing style had always been a little at odds (I'd been in another of his games before that), and with this particular game and genre it really just didn't click for either of us. He said that I clearly wasn't enjoying myself—which I wasn't—and that it was affecting the other players, which I didn't want. So I left. And that's really all you have to do. If you approach it maturely, talk to the player as a friend, and put it in terms of "Well, that didn't quite work, but no biggie," it should be okay.

# CLOSING THE GAME

To all good things there comes an end, and that includes every game. But the ending is just as important as the beginning—actually, it’s a lot more important. So you want to be sure you get it right.

## Player Satisfaction

When all is said and done, and you finally sit back and say, “And that’s the end of the adventure,” you want your players to cheer. That’s the ideal—they should go “Wahoo!” or “Yay!” or “All right!”, not at the idea that it’s finally over but because it was great, awesome, fantastic. Think about your favorite movies. When they end, you feel exhilarated, alive—even though it’s over and the credits are rolling, you’re excited. Why? Because you’ve made it through the other side, of course—you held on during the ride and you came out at the end intact. And you had a great time doing it. That’s what you want your players to feel.

How do you get there? It’s all based on player expectations. When you started the game and assembled your players, you should have had an idea of what they wanted. Did they want intrigue? Mass combat? Phenomenal treasure? Hair-raising terror? Whatever it was, it was your job to give it to them. That’s why you developed the adventure after gathering the group, so you could create it to meet their demands and fulfill their expectations. On top of that, what did they want from their characters? Were they looking for real development and depth in their roles, fame and fortune, or just

to survive the long, dark night? The goal all along was to meet most of their expectations—you cannot meet all of them for everyone, and trying is foolish, but you should try to hit most of them for everyone.

On top of that, gaming is a story. It’s taking part in a movie or a novel or a video game, actually being able to affect what goes on around you, being able to take center stage and direct events. In the end, your players should feel that the story was good—that the plot was interesting, that it fit the genre and the setting, that the NPCs were interesting and entertaining, that events unfolded well and at a good pace, and that they made a difference. That’s ultimately what every player

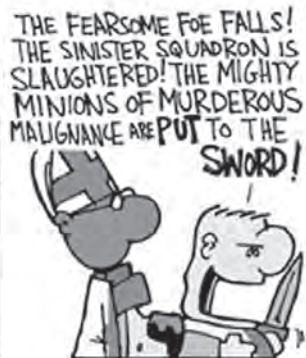
**“In the end, your players should feel that the story was good...and that they made a difference.”**

wants, to have made a difference, to know he impacted the story.

And to have had fun. Isn’t fun what it’s all about? If you ran a good game, there will be stories to tell for years afterward, both about the characters in the game and about things the players did during the game. There will be in jokes based on the game and the group. And there will be those moments that get retold in a hushed and slightly breathless tone, usually starting with, “This one time, during our game, this amazing thing happened. You see ....”

But how to actually end the game? That’s going to depend in large part on the genre and on your plot. Is there a big bad villain? Then we have to know what happens to him, whether the group gets him or he gets away and vows to return. Was there a disaster to be averted? We have to either have it averted or have it happen and there be an aftermath. Were strange and

### DORK TOWER



By John Kovalic

unknowable creatures loosed upon an unsuspecting town? Then either they were destroyed or the town is now a fiendish hellhole. Think about movies again and how they end (ignoring the idiotic need to set up blatantly for a sequel). Good movies end with all of the major plot points wrapped up, and some of the minor ones—but not all. It’s the same with books. Don’t wrap everything up, because that’s unrealistic—in life, you never get all the loose ends. Tie most of them together, including a few you’ve saved from the beginning. That girl in the bar? She turns out to have been an agent working for your company, keeping tabs on you—and she turns in a glowing report. The oddly prophetic name the man called out to you on the street—it’s the name the cheering crowd shouts at you in the last scene. Little things like that show the players you were paying attention and also that you planned ahead.

For your last scene, plan carefully. Is this an epic game? It should be a big fanfare, then, as at the end of *Star Wars*, with trumpets blaring and row upon row of gleaming knights saluting and a grateful monarch bestowing titles and royal gifts. Was it a horror game? The end should be much more low-key, along the lines of watching the sun rise and knowing that the long night is finally over. Was it an espionage game? It should end with a debriefing and your director offering mildly understated congratulations on a job well done. The last scene is what will stick in the players’ heads long after the rest, so you want it to convey the mood of the entire game all by itself. After it’s over, you want the players to collapse in relief, completely exhausted because the game has drained them of all their energy. They should be tired but happy, and they should feel like they’ve created something good.

## GM Satisfaction

What about you? When the game’s over, what should you feel? Much the same as the players, actually—satisfaction at a job well done, joy at creating such a good story, delight at having had so much fun, and exhaus-

**“If your players detest the villain not because he’s the bad guy but because he’s a real heel, the quest to stop this fiend will be much more memorable and satisfying.”**

— John R. Phythyon, Jr., p. 80

barely survive, and know it.” As a GM, your goals are more story-oriented than character-oriented—you had certain scenes you wanted to hit and plotlines you wanted to develop, and if those happened you should be happy. Don’t worry about whether the plot went where you wanted—half the time it goes in directions you never expected because the players intervene. Did you handle those alterations well, and when you look back does it all make a cohesive story? That’s a good sign—it means your plotlines held together and you were able to weave a solid story from them, even as they warped a bit. But you want the story to be good on all levels, so you want your NPCs to have been believable and interesting and easily distinguished from one another, your descriptions to have been clear and evocative, and your story to have held the group’s interest and to have excited them and driven them to play.

So how do you know if you’re satisfied? That’s up to you, really. But if you can look back a week or so after the game ends and say, “Yeah, that went well,” and if you feel a little bit of loss that week when you realize you won’t be running, I’d say you did a good job.

## Leaving It Open

Ah, but what if you don’t want it to end? What if you have more ideas for the same group in the same genre, and you want to keep going? In that case, you end the adventure but not the campaign. You still wrap up most of the major plotlines, but you might leave one of them loose, like that terrorist who got away. Or you wrap up all of the major plotlines but leave a few minor ones—who was that guy who looked like Claude, and did his appearance have anything to do with that strange message you received in the bar?

## QUESTING THE GAME

The key to continuing is that the adventure must still come to a full close, but not a full stop. It's just like the books or movies in a series. They each have their own plots, and those do end, but the characters are still around at the close and there are hints that more trouble awaits, or that one problem was dealt with but not all of them. If you knew from the start that you wanted to do a full campaign, you probably built smaller problems and then a larger one around them, and the smaller ones have to be solved before the larger one can be attempted. Those smaller problems are the goals of the adventures, and now that one is done the next one rises up—this was probably a minor plotline in the first adventure so that you could set the stage, and now it will become a major one for the next adventure.

Even if you didn't have that planned, you can take remaining plot threads and shape them into larger pieces. Or just use them to kick off—the characters decide to go to Buenos Aires, since that's where the one PC last saw Claude, and they find themselves in the middle of a struggle between two local crime bosses. Or our heroes set out to take a book they recovered to a famous mage, only to find him missing and his house

ransacked. You can link them as simply as that, but usually you do want to give the characters (and the players) a chance to breathe a bit—let them take some time off, but not so long that they lose the flavor of the game, and then pick up a few days or weeks or months after the end of the last game. If you have your players think about what their characters were doing during the downtime, it will keep them involved and interested, which

makes it easier to start back up.

Of course you'll have to shape a new adventure, but now you know the characters a lot better, so it will be easier to build something that suits them. You already have some material to work with which you can weave

throughout—if you keep one of the plot threads in the background, it could even link the first two adventures to more down the road. But don't let any one major thread go for too long, or else your players might get frustrated—if the entire campaign is one larger plot with one major goal, give smaller goals along the way, so the players can take care of those and get a sense of accomplishment and of progress. And keep it fun, both for yourself and for them—otherwise, what's the point?

**“When a campaign is dying, however, don't fret overly much about it. Don't waste labor trying to revivify it if it's withering on the vine.”**

— Lester Smith, p. 142

# SECRETS FROM THE MASTERS

The text of articles in this chapter are designated as Open Content, with exception to the following articles, which are specifically not designated as Open Content: *Gamemaster's Flowchart 101* by Mark Simmons; *The Beginner's Game: How to Attract and Keep New RPG Players* by John Nephew; *Trust at the Gaming Table* by Frank Mentzer; and *Treasure* by Steven Marsh. All images are not Open Content. All article titles in this chapter are designated as Product Identity. Contributors' names are used with permission.

## Genre and Setting Simulation: Perils, Pitfalls, and Possibilities

by Steven S. Long

Copyright ©2002 by Steven S. Long

When a gamemaster sets out to create and run a gaming campaign, she almost always has inspirations from movies, fiction, comic books, and similar sources in mind. Her influences may be subconscious—she likes the novels of Tolkien and Kurtz, so she tries to incorporate elements similar to theirs into her game without deliberately copying them—or conscious—she just saw the movie *Stargate* and tries to file off the serial numbers and create a virtually identical campaign—but in both cases the influences exist. When gamers create and run games, they often try to simulate the media, settings, and genres that so fascinate them.

There's nothing wrong with this. One of the things that pulls many people into gaming is the desire to create their *own* settings and worlds, ones as well portrayed, cleverly put together, and wondrous as the books they read and the television shows they see. It's only natural that our viewing and reading habits form interconnections with our gaming hobby.

By the same token, however, games are *not* novels. Nor, for that matter, are they movies, television shows, comic books, short stories, or anything else. They're *games*, pure and simple, and though they may be influenced by mass-media entertainment, they don't follow

all of the same "rules." Sometimes you can recreate a genre in a game with no difficulty. At other times a setting proves so unadaptable to RPG's that it's not worth the effort to try to carry it over to the gaming table. Most of the time games exist in a gray area where they can simulate some aspects of a genre or setting well and others not so well.

The wise GM learns to work within the boundaries of genre and setting simulation. She takes advantage of the nature of roleplaying games to create her own stories and settings which, while properly reminiscent of the books, movies, and shows that inspired her, also make use of the unique strengths and attributes of gaming itself. This article examines some of the differences between gaming and mass media-entertainments and discusses their implications for creating enjoyable games and characters.

Of course, this discussion assumes, at least in part, that the main goal of a roleplaying game is "story creation." That's not necessarily the case. One could argue that roleplaying games as they've been developed and played over the past 30 years have little, if anything, to do with "story creation" or "storytelling"—they're just an elaborate and unusual form of wargame.



## LESSONS FROM THE MASTERS

A true “story creation game” might not even qualify as a “game” as that term’s commonly employed, but that’s a subject for another book. For purposes of this article, “story creation” remains, at some level, a major, if not preeminent, objective of RPG play.

## The Free-willed Protagonist

The most fundamental difference between RPGs and mass-media entertainments is that in gaming the primary creator of the story—the GM—does *not* control the protagonists—the player characters (PCs).

In a novel or movie, the author or director has full control over everything, but particularly over the main characters, who are the focus of the story. If he wants them to go to a certain place, they do. If he needs them to overlook an important clue (or deduce its meaning) so the story can advance, they do. If he needs them to remain uninjured, then no one hurts them. They jump when he says jump, zig when he wants them to zig, and in general behave themselves.

Gaming is completely different. The players control the main characters, and the GM—the equivalent of the author or director—controls everyone else only. The players can, at least in theory, have their characters go anywhere and do anything, regardless of the story or plot the GM has in mind for a particular evening’s game session. They often refuse to jump, even when directly ordered to do so, and zag when the GM prefers that they zig. In short, PCs are free-willed.

Since the GM doesn’t directly control the main characters, it’s necessary to have some mechanism by which she can indirectly control them. Random task resolution does that by allowing her to influence character actions (albeit slightly). It simultaneously gives the players a measure of comfort, because it assures them the game has some degree of objectivity—a d20 player *knows* that rolling a 20 means success almost all the time, regardless of whether the GM is skilled or unskilled, fair or unfair, biased or unbiased. But at any given crucial plot point, a missed or failed roll of the dice can drastically change what happens for the rest of the game, and often not to the GM’s benefit. Ultimately, it’s best to acknowledge this significant difference and accept it by erring on the side of “game fun” instead of “genre simulation.”

## The Disallowed Player Character

In a novel, comic book, or TV show, you can have almost any type of character who fits the setting, genre, and story. More than once, readers/viewers have experienced the exploits of characters who could control time, were invulnerable to all (or nearly all) forms of attack, possessed mental powers vast enough to enslave worlds, and so forth. This works fine in mass-media entertainments, since the author/director can prevent the character from abusing his powers or using his abilities in ways that diminish the dramatic tension.

However, since a GM doesn’t control her PCs, some types of characters, or character abilities, should not be allowed in a roleplaying game. If played they would “unbalance” the game (*i.e.*, make it too easy for one PC, or the PCs as a group, to succeed, thereby robbing the game of its challenge and thus its enjoyment). In most games, this includes characters who cannot be hit by attacks or who are invulnerable to damage. Other examples of abilities that GMs rarely allow are the ability to travel through time at will, retrocognition and other abilities that make it difficult or impossible to run mystery scenarios, and some types of mental or psionic abilities. In fact, most abilities, if sufficiently powerful, can become so detrimental to the game they must be disallowed. Thus, gaming characters lack some of the freedom mass-media characters possess, but it’s a restriction most players gladly accept in exchange for the power to control their characters in all other matters.

Similarly, many GMs impose some restrictions on characters’ mental attributes (whether they’re called Intelligence, Intellect, Wits, or something else) and on related abilities such as deductive capacity. After all, the reasoning goes, how can someone play a character who’s more intelligent than he himself is? By definition it’s impossible; unlike, say, strength, you can’t easily simulate superior intellect with dice rolls and the like. Moreover, even when you can, many GMs prefer not to. The game is a lot more fun for everyone concerned if the players themselves make the deductions, solve the mysteries, and reason through the difficulties their characters encounter.

## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

## Characters in Groups

The GMs lack of direct control over the main characters and the events of the story also affects the composition of groups of player characters. In mass-media entertainments, authors and directors freely mix characters of vastly different capabilities since they can tailor the stories to make all the characters equally important. The Fellowship of the Ring includes Gandalf (the most powerful wizard in Middle-earth) and four hobbits (no skills or abilities to speak of), yet each proves vital to the story. In *The Avengers* comic book, the team can simultaneously feature relatively weak characters (Dr. Druid, Hawkeye) alongside the likes of Thor and Iron Man.

Gaming, unfortunately, doesn't work that way. Because the players exert such influence over the story and the actions of the main characters, all those characters have to be relatively equal in power and competence, or else the players of the "weak" characters feel ineffectual (and rightly so). For example, in a d20 game, most of the characters need to be about the same level or else the higher-level characters eclipse their brethren. Similarly, characters belonging to generally weaker classes (e.g., bard) often play second fiddle to characters of the more powerful classes (fighters, clerics).

It's possible to have a fun group of gaming characters that mixes weak and powerful, but only if you're willing to put in a lot of work to keep the game enjoyable for all the players. You can try, at least to some extent, to plan encounters and obstacles so that the weaker characters have their moments to shine. You'll find this much easier if the weak characters have some crucial skills or abilities the stronger characters lack entirely (healing magic, lockpicking, the power to walk through walls). Even then, the players of the weaker characters will probably experience some resentment or feelings of powerlessness from time to time.

## Unusual Attitudes and Abilities

In a novel or movie, the main characters always fit perfectly the story the author/director wants to tell. After all, they're custom-designed for that story (or the story for them). If they need a particular ability, gadget, or skill to get past some plot point, they have it—if they

haven't displayed it before, that certainly won't stop the creator from giving it to them, *deus ex machina*, when it's needed (Bat-Shark Repellent, anyone?).

In games, since players generally have a high degree of freedom when it comes to creating their characters' abilities and attitudes, they may not fit the story as well. In fact, they may not fit it at all. Perhaps worse, they may fit it reasonably well but have some quirk or flaw (whether defined by rules or no) that leads them to derail the story or the campaign from time to time.

For example, in one of this author's d20 campaigns, there was a gnome thief character with some illusionist abilities. The character had a penchant for turning invisible and just wandering off to explore whenever the mood took him. He never bothered to tell anyone, and it had nothing to do with the story; the player had simply decided that "my character gets bored easily" and was roleplaying that. Every time he did it, he completely wrecked whatever story the group was in the process of telling. The other PCs had to drop whatever they were doing, however illogical or dramatically inappropriate that was, track the gnome down, and get him out of the trouble he inevitably got himself into. Adventures both hilarious and enjoyable sometimes ensued, but more often than not the gnome's antics were just a lot of bothersome interference. Once or twice other PCs even whacked him on the back of the head with a dagger pommel to knock him out and keep him from throwing the story into a cocked hat.

"But wait!" you may cry in a rage. "The player was just roleplaying. There's nothing wrong with good roleplaying, is there?" In the abstract, no, of course not. Good roleplaying is to be encouraged—but not as an end in itself. Gaming is not performance art. In a roleplaying game, which is about a group of friends creating an adventure story together, *good roleplaying only helps if it contributes to the process of story creation*. Good roleplaying that isn't dramatically appropriate, detracts from the story, or interferes with what the group as a whole wants to do, is, far more often than not, a bad thing.

To a certain extent, this is another of those problems so inherent to gaming that you can't completely solve it. Player freedom means that you, as GM, can't control the main characters the way an author or director does. However, you can take steps to minimize the problem. First and foremost, don't let players create their

# ADVENTURES FROM THE MASTERS

characters in a vacuum. Give them guidance—tell them what sort of story you’re planning to tell (and get their input, so it’s one they want to tell, too), and make suggestions for characters (and character personalities) who fit the story. Second, don’t let the players create their characters by themselves; get them together in a group for a character creation session. That way they can feed off each other’s ideas, creating a group of characters with solid backgrounds who mesh together. This gives them a reason to go on adventures as a group rather than pursuing their separate agendas.

## Character Perfection

In novels, movies, and comics, characters are rarely, if ever, perfect. They have flaws ranging from short tempers to cowardice, to loved ones to look after, to greed, to enemies hunting them. It’s in overcoming these imperfections that they show themselves to be true heroes. It’s not hard for the perfect man, unflawed and unhindered, to accomplish some great deed. A true hero struggles to overcome internal and external difficulties and triumph in spite of them. It makes for great stories.

In roleplaying games, players often strenuously resist any attempt to impose flaws and complications upon their characters. Some games, such as the d20 system, pander to this desire for *ubermensch*-hood by ignoring the concept of flaws as part of the character creation process altogether. Others, far too many to name, bribe players to give their characters imperfections by providing extra game goodies for each flaw taken—more points to spend, extra skills to choose, whatever. Except in the hands of mature and dramatically aware players, the result tends to be characters of immense power who are physically, psychologically, and socially crippled in ways that make no sense for the story. That’s because players are choosing flaws for the reward, not out of a sense of dramatic appropriateness or a desire to create a truly heroic, well defined, and intriguing character (how intriguing, after all, is perfection?).

*Fudge* stands out from the pack in this regard. It pro-

vides for character flaws and, depending on how you as GM set things up, can even require players to take one or more for their characters. The players get *nothing* tangible in return: no extra points to spend, no skill boost, nothing—except the satisfaction of creating a great character.

Overcoming this problem is simply a matter of GM planning and oversight. Before the character creation process begins, let the players know that you expect them to build characters with intriguing flaws (or “story hooks,” as some GMs aptly call them)—for no particular reward. The reward comes in improved play and story creation. Also let them know what types of flaws are appropriate for the campaign and which aren’t. “Tends to wander off,” the flaw possessed by the gnome described above, probably isn’t appropriate for *any* well run or tightly planned game campaign.

Your best touchstone for evaluating character flaws is this question: “Can I see a character in a book, movie, or TV show having this flaw without ruining the story?” If the answer is “yes,” then you can probably find a way to work the flaw into your story. If the answer is “no”—as with “tends to wander off”—

then explain to the player why you can’t allow that flaw and tell him to come up with something else that fits better.

**“Your best touchstone for evaluating character flaws is this question: ‘Can I see a character in a book, movie, or TV show having this flaw without ruining the story?’”**

## Demon Practicality

In mass-media entertainment, characters *take risks*. They do all sorts of dangerous, impractical, foolish things in pursuit of their cherished goals. For the sake of true love, they put their lives in danger to obtain the magic rose they need to awaken the princess from her enchanted sleep. To obtain riches (and thus personal freedom or the ability to pursue other goals), they undertake perilous quests to slay dragons. To restore the true king to the throne, they place themselves in the path of the usurper’s army, the most powerful in the land. The fact that these actions and goals are socially or physically harmful to them, outrageously expensive, or virtually impossible to achieve doesn’t matter one



## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

whit. What matters is *accomplishing that goal*, practicality and “the safe road” be damned.

Furthermore, as they pursue their goals, mass-media characters don’t always do the practical thing. They don’t check every corridor or door for traps and secret passages. They don’t arm themselves with five types of weapons. They don’t try to formulate a back-up plan and carry the proper gear for twenty-seven possible different contingencies. Only in genres where this sort of behavior fits, such as some espionage and military-oriented stories, do you see characters act with such exquisite practicality.

All too often, game characters are *nothing* like this. They approach everything from the perspective of practicality. They want to minimize every danger, plan for every possibility, equip themselves with one of everything listed on the game’s price charts, and search everything—*everything*—for items hidden or valuable. They don’t act like characters in novels and movies at all. They act like commandoes sent into enemy territory to take out some important target. In other words, they all too often completely miss the point of the story.

Weaning your players off practicality is a twofold process. First, explain the problem to them. Many players aren’t aware of it; they’re merely behaving in the way that seems best to them—after all, they want to protect their characters, and they themselves probably do the practical thing most of the time in their daily lives. Second, and more importantly, *when they do the dramatically appropriate but impractical thing, don’t penalize them for it*. If they skip on checking for traps to keep the story moving along, don’t spring traps on them—that just encourages them to check for traps everywhere they go. If they decide to go somewhere lightly armed because it would look stupid and detract from the story to wear armor and carry swords, make sure they can handle any opposition they meet with the weapons they have at hand. If they find themselves unable to fight effectively when lightly armed, they’ll wear plate armor and swords wherever they go, and justifiably so.

## Dramatic Results

Other than lack of direct creator control of the protagonists, perhaps the main difference between mass-media entertainments and roleplaying games is that

novels, movies, comic books, and the like describe character actions in terms of *dramatic results*, whereas games depict them through *numbers and rules*. In a book or television show, a character in combat doesn’t stop to think, “Okay, I’ll use the Two-fisted Firing combat maneuver, and I’ll dive sideways to cut the penalties in half, and I’ll aim for the torso to achieve a +1 to-hit bonus.” All that’s running through his mind is, “I’ve gotta beat this guy, and to do that I need to ...” (shoot him first, push him off the cliff, get to the gun before he does, solve this puzzle more quickly, or what have you). He doesn’t stop to add up modifiers and pick maneuvers, he just does the best he can to get the job done, and the author or director describes what happens.

To cut down on the numbers and increase the drama in your game sessions, try to *think in dramatic terms*. Consider tossing out all the maneuvers and modifiers and other game impedimenta, and instead think in terms of dramatic actions and outcomes. Don’t ask a player, “Okay, it’s your turn, what maneuver are you going to use?” Instead say, “Your turn, Bob—what’s your character going to do?” Bob, in turn, shouldn’t say, “He’s going to spend one action aiming at the rope, another action to make a Two-handed Strike with his sword, and if he succeeds, spend 2 Fate Points to make the chandelier fall on Dr. Grimaldi’s head. How much damage will the chandelier do if I hit?” He should say, “I’m going to cut the rope and knock Dr. Grimaldi out with the falling chandelier!” In other words, Bob is thinking, and describing his character’s actions, in *dramatic terms*. He’s forgetting the numbers and rules and just trying to have fun telling a story. He tells you the result he desires, not the series of actions he plans to take. You as GM can then assign one big modifier to the whole action (based in part on how difficult it is and in part on how it contributes to the story). Bob makes one quick random determination to see if he succeeds. If he does, great! Dr. Grimaldi collapses unconscious under the ruins of the chandelier. If not, the fiendish professor remains awake to fight on another round.

*Fudge*, with its simple, freeform character creation and task resolution mechanics, suits this style of play very well. A *Fudge* GM can easily wrap everything up into one “dramatic modifier” if her players can stop thinking about the rules and think more like people crafting a story. They may lose a rule advantage or two

along the way, but they'll gain so much more enjoyment and satisfaction from the gaming experience that it'll be more than worth it.

## Conclusion

What all this philosophizing and suggesting boils down to is this: You're playing a game about story creation, you're not writing a novel or creating a movie. If you hold simulation of novels and movies as your ultimate goal, you're likely to be disappointed, because games aren't mass-media entertainments—they're *games*. You can do a lot to make your games more like mass-media entertainments than they are now and in the process improve them, perhaps dramatically. But you shouldn't ever lose sight of the fact that they remain games and thus follow different rules. Try to get around those rules and you're likely to become frustrated and aggravated when your games don't measure up to your favorite books and shows. If you stick to those rules, you'll find your games fun, exciting, and enriching in and of themselves.

## The Joy of Research

by Kenneth Hite

Copyright ©2002 by Kenneth Hite

*"I'll read at random until I find a couple things that make me stop and ask questions: 'Wait a second. Why did he really do that? That doesn't make any sense.' You get three or four of those, and you ask what explanation might be perfectly concealed under these three or four things. And because of all my childhood reading, all the explanations tend to be, 'Oh, I bet dead guys are behind it!' Once I've figured that much out, the research can be more focused. And pretty soon, it becomes an exercise in resisting paranoia because you'll find that your research genuinely does seem to support whatever goofy theory you've come up with."*

— Tim Powers

Research can make the difference between a vibrantly detailed game world brimming with chrome and intricate Byzantine pathways, and another march through a metaphorical maze of twisty settings, all alike. It can also make the difference between a fun night of swing-

ing halberds at the Vile Spaniard and a tedious recreation of 16th-century shipboard life. As with anything else, too much research is a bad thing. Unfortunately, "too much" will vary depending on your game, your players, and you, the GM. (If you don't want to do *any* research, fine. Here's your copy of *Greyhawk*, go on to the next chapter, and no hard feelings.) If you and the players begin on the same page, you stand a pretty good chance of getting it right by accident, though. One way to get everyone going the same direction is with player handouts or pregame briefings. (I usually present this stuff during the first game session, while people are creating characters. That way, I can sneak it in with those rulings: "Well, you could be an Irish tinker; in fact, in this era, they were thought of as kind of a spooky, faery sort, always kidnapping folks and casting hedge magics.") Depending on how much the setting or the subject you're researching will influence your game, you might prepare a reading list for your players, boil the needful stuff down to a player handout (or link said stuff onto a Web site), or just pop a good movie or documentary into the VCR and have a "video briefing." But before it can get into your players' brains, the research needs to get into yours.

Research begins by asking questions. Which questions? That's the first one. The next questions are those old J-school standbys that we've all heard of so often that they're clichés: Why, Who, When, Where, What, and How? This, by the way, is an important lesson for researching: Often, clichés are just what you need to start with, to get your research groove on. (*Cliché*: The Roman Emperor Commodus was evil. *Research Groove*: Okay, *how* evil was he? Was he a vampire? Can I pretend he was a vampire?) So, before we start asking these questions, let's answer them.

## WHY are you doing this?

Beats the hell out of me. If you don't want to, and if your players don't seem to mind a few slips or fuzzy patches here and there, then don't do any research at all. This isn't the real world, after all—nobody's doctorate, job, or life is depending on total accuracy in your roleplaying game. In fact, I can tell you from personal experience that a swashbuckling pirate game (for example) is easier to run, and easier on your players, if all you have to go on is the shared memory of a few

SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

late-night Tyrone Power and Errol Flynn movies. If you've actually broken out David Cordingly's *Under the Black Flag* or any of the other current historical analyses of the era, you may feel a certain obligation to represent (even haltingly) historical truth. Which, since it conflicts in many places with the genre assumptions your players share, will get in the way of the fun, or at least make you work harder to present it. (This isn't to say that the real pirate era wasn't adventurous and exciting. It was, just in a very different way from Errol Flynn movies.) Ignorance is, as they say, bliss. As long as everybody is on the same page, you don't have to do any research at all.

I do research because I love doing it. In fact, I strongly suspect that the reason I'm a professional game designer is because it means I get paid to noodle around doing research. Another reason you might want to do research is because truth really is stranger than fiction. You can come up with a vast surplus of weird notions or keen ideas for games by doing research, with considerably less effort than sweating creative bullets. And you'll already have some notion of how this cool factoid fits into your setting, since it will (at some point) have fit into the game setting we like to call the Real World.

## WHO are you doing this for?

You're doing this either for your players or for yourself. Some of it you can make your players do for you—if you have someone in your game of archaeological adventure who reads Egyptological journals as a hobby, make him write the player handout! (At the very least, get him to recommend a good general book or two on his favorite topic.) That player can remain a reference during the game, if you want him to. This will depend on how collaborative your game is—you're within your rights as GM to ignore his sputtered objections, although that might hurt his feelings. Conversely, you can use your "expert player" to fill in the details you don't know, although this second option can force you to think on your feet to justify something or to make sure you drop the correct clues. Be ready for the results from any approach you take.

Even without an "expert player," you may need to tailor your research to your players' needs and styles.



In a historical game, for instance, even the type of research or handout might vary. A deeply immersive roleplayer may need to read a historical novel set in your game's time period, while a simulationist player might be more comfortable with a timeline, a geological map, and an encyclopedia article. Keep the info dump to a manageable size and present it in a format your players can use.

Player temperament can impact your research needs, too. Phlegmatic players, or those who are just there to slaughter orcs, or players who trust you implicitly won't make enormous demands on your research time. Once you feel comfortable, you're done. Some players, though, are nervous Nellies who require that every rivet in the world be fact-checked to a fare-thee-well. Others are such free and independent spirits that you need to do a lot of research to cover all the potential trouble they might get into. In either case, the answer is not necessarily more research, but rather tailoring the game to minimize those players' ability to damage it. (That's the kind of thing the rest of this book discusses; go to it.) However, in general, if you've done as much research as your most demanding player requires, you're done.

# FOUNTS FROM THE MASTER

Once the players are taken care of, you look at the other target of your research: you, the GM. Decide who you are, as the target audience of your own work. Are you a detail-oriented worldbuilder who needs lots of details? Or are you a big-picture impressionist GM who needs an overall “gestalt” of the subject but can wing the details? Are you someone who loves setting but needs a little help with the plots, or vice versa? Perhaps your players need to believe that you know what you’re doing; a good rule of thumb is to know just enough about your subject to know more than your players do. Maybe you’re just doing it for your own sense of self-confidence in the subject. (Personally, I think this is a crock. Like I said before, you’re all there to have fun, not to defend a doctoral thesis. But I am a legendary monster of ego, immune to the scorn of my players.) At any rate, know yourself and think about what you’ve needed before in games, or what resources have helped you previously—then go seek them out for your new project.

## WHEN do you need it by?

Although some people have months and months to spend prepping for a campaign, for the busy gamer, speed counts. For speed, you must often sacrifice accuracy, or at least nuance. One-stop reference books such as encyclopedias are fast, as is the Internet. For extreme speed, there are even encyclopedias on the Internet, such as the *Britannica* at <http://www.britannica.com>. Some game companies’ sourcebooks boil topics down for “one-stop shopping”; *GURPS* books, old Hero system and *Rolemaster* genre-books, White Wolf’s city books, and *AD&D 2nd Edition* “green cover” historical-setting books all have much to recommend them for the busy GM in a hurry. In general, it’s a good idea to see if some game company has produced a sourcebook on your topic already; even a bad game book will give you a basis to work from.

If you have a longer time frame, try reading a college or high-school textbook on your topic, or better yet a good children’s book. Children’s books (especially modern “educational” ones like those from the publisher Dorling Kindersley) have lots of color pictures, take the time to answer obvious questions clearly, and often *have* been fact-checked to a fare-thee-well.

(They’re also pretty short, too.) Best of all, children’s books avoid the waffle-waffle of “on the one hand this, but on the other hand not this” that proper academic texts glory in. In children’s books there’s one story line, and they stick to it. Time enough to subvert, invert, or revise the conventional wisdom once you know what it is in the first place.

If you have time for more than one book, try using the first book’s bibliography to point you to more resources. If you have a proper academic work, it will have footnotes, so you can track the specific source for whatever topic you actually care more about. Even without footnotes, just trolling through the bibliography looking for more promising titles is a surefire way to refine and extend your search and avoid spending time running down dead ends. Believe me, bibliography surfing is the way to go—that’s how I got my master’s degree. Some game books include bibliographies, which is doubly handy—it lets you find what the game’s author thought were the most gameable and accessible works on the topic.

## WHERE can you get research material?

Did I mention the Internet yet? This is a great way to harness other people’s disturbing obsessions for your own selfish purposes. There are immense Web sites out there on everything from Gnostic codices to medieval Paris to the order of battle of the Waffen SS. (Some of those latter Web sites can get a little creepy, but it can all work out if you’re researching the Karotechia for your *Delta Green* game.) Combine that with rafts of reference books and classic public domain literature, all online somewhere, and you have one hell of a library as close as your desktop.

Of course, in many cities, you also have one hell of a library as close as your library, and the books on the Waffen SS there are somewhat less creepy. Interlibrary loan can get you books from other libraries if you’re patient enough, so even if your library is kind of podunk, you can work it to your own advantage. (And frankly, even the most podunk library is going to have a lot more books than you’re ever going to need on most mainstream topics.) If you live in a college town, try getting access to the university library; these collections are usually more comprehensive in reference and

# SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

research type topics, since they don't have to shelve any John Grisham novels. In any library, make nice with the reference librarians. Their job is to find recon-dite information in their library, and by watching them you can learn how a professional approaches the task. Most reference librarians are very nice people who are desperately wishing for just the kind of weird request a GM needs answered, because most questions they get are boring as hell. It will truly brighten their day.

You can also find books in bookstores, no kidding. Big superstores like Barnes & Noble and Borders seem to actually encourage you to read books there, which can save you time and money. Online, <http://www.amazon.com> has begun including excerpts from many of its books on the order pages; this can be another cheap way to browse, or at least to see if a given book is going to tell you exactly what you need to know

about the Waffen SS.

## WHAT are you looking for?

This again is a question you have to answer for yourself and for your own group. You might be looking for "just the facts, ma'am"—a specific answer to a specific question. "How thick is the Great Wall of China?" or "How fast does an armored car go?" General reference books will most likely help here; for more technical or involved questions, hit an in-depth, detailed source first, if you have one. If you want to know where King Charles II was on Halloween 1666, look in the thickest biography of King Charles II you can find. If it isn't there, feel free to make it up, because it's pretty likely that nobody in your gaming group will know the difference. The key is to get the answer (or an answer) and get out.

If you're looking for "background" material on a

## Kenneth Hite's Personal Old Reliable Standby Resources

These only cover what I like to laughingly refer to as "the real world." For both SF and fantasy worldbuilding references, I tend to use gaming books or a hamfisted gestalt of the vast ocean of SF and fantasy books I've read during my misspent youth.

- **Google.** This is by far my favorite Web search tool now; by typing any two or three words (such as "Shakespeare" and "alchemy," "Oklahoma" and "UFO," or "Chinese" and "time travel") into the box at <http://www.google.com>, I receive the most-linked-to (which correlates surprisingly well with most useful) Web pages on just about anything. (Google now also lets you search Usenet posts, which are, if anything, even more arcane and verbose.) If I have a specific quote I want to contextualize, I still type it verbatim (in quotes) into AltaVista, since it isn't picky about stuff like "the" and "and."

- **Lonely Planet Travel Guides.** These manage to combine readability with completeness and an astonishing number of decent maps. Any good travel book is better than 95% of all RPG setting books for any modern-day game and can be surprisingly useful even for historical gaming. If you can't find a Lonely Planet book on your chosen setting, try a Rough Guide, and if you can't find one of those, just dive for the fattest book on the shelf.

- **Any Decent Historical Atlas.** Look for one with many, many maps along with some explanatory text. The Penguin

and Anchor series are both excellent; in one volume, the Oxford and Dorling Kindersley atlases are both good. These combine geography and history in an instantly comprehensible format; for me, any game has to start with "who was where when."

- **The Shelf Of Books Immediately To My Left As I Type This.** In their (completely idiosyncratic) shelf order: *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, *Webster's Biographical Dictionary*, *The People's Chronology* (by James Trager), *Webster's Geographical Dictionary*, *An Encyclopedia of World History* (by William L. Langer), *The Encyclopedia of Military History* (by R. Ernest and Trevor N. Dupuy), *The Merriam-Webster New Collegiate Dictionary*, *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, *Weapons: An International Encyclopedia from 5000 B.C. to 2000 A.D.* (by the Diagram Group), *The World Almanac 2001*, *Unexplained!* (by Jerome Clark), *The Magician's Companion* (by Bill Whitcomb), and *Funk & Wagnall's Encyclopedia of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*. Almost any basic fact I care about is in one or more of these books somewhere. Many of these, and many more reference books (along with a cartload of novels, poetry, and so forth) are online at <http://www.bartleby.com>.

- **The Encyclopedia Britannica.** This is the source of all wisdom and knowledge. I own the 13th edition, assembled from the legendary 11th edition of 1910, updated with four volumes in 1926. The Web provides me with the modern version at <http://www.britannica.com>.

## TIPS FROM THE MASTERS

specific setting or for any kind of interesting material that can be plugged into one, use the Who and When sections to figure out what kind of research you need to do and do it. Historical novels, children's books, and popular books on scientific or military matters will help you get an overview of a topic, and you can discard anything you disagree with later. Books by conspiracy theorists, New Age gurus, and sensational journalists may not be accurate, but they are written to be punchy, easy to grasp, and full of sensationalistic details. In short, they're game books.

Such books are also one-sided and tendentious, which can be a real godsend. In many games, you need to work the real world to support a preconceived notion: "The Emperor Commodus was a vampire" or "UFO's are behind the development of plasma-screen monitors." Read a Tim Powers novel such as *The Stress of Her Regard* or *Declare* and see how he uses real history in just that way, in order to drive the narrative of a secret history. (There are more examples of such secret-historical thinking in my own *Suppressed Transmission* books, available from finer game stores everywhere, he said modestly.) Twist anything handy to fit your idea, or just emphasize the data that fit and ignore the ones that don't. If your story is interesting enough, players won't mind that some fact you uncovered in a tedious article somewhere contradicts it.

## HOW do you do it?

This is a tough metaquestion, which is why I left it for last. Research, like any other intuitive skill such as bicycling or flirting, is easy to do once you master it and frustratingly impossible to explain to someone else. The answers are different for each person; no two researchers learn, organize, or apply facts in the same way. I'm very much about stories and narratives, which is why I prefer historical research to more quantifiable stuff like astrophysics or economics. Other people have to work outward from concrete data, building up a picture piece by piece and only then making up a story about it. With that in mind, here are a couple of tricks that work for me.

- *Apply the research to your specific, immediate game needs, and then let the game drive your next questions.* In other words, only do as much research as you have to in order to get through the next session. (If you use a

computer while gaming, as many GMs do, you can even do some online research or check a CD-ROM encyclopedia in the middle of the session while the players are arguing about marching order.) Keep your research focused on the immediate "facts on the ground." How are the guards armed? What's the layout of the temple? Who are the most likely vampires in the region? Then drive the story toward the research you've already done and use your own creativity or the demands of the story to answer any unexpected questions of motivation or interpretation. Once you've finished the session for the night, you should have a pretty good idea of the kinds of questions you'll need for the next session. Repeat as necessary.

- *Be open to sudden inspiration.* Try to leave your game open enough to swallow whatever incredibly cool thing you just found out. This is kind of the inverse of the first method, but the two can work powerfully in parallel. If you're just noodling along reading the history of Transylvania and you notice that Dracula means "son of the dragon," it's neat if you can add dragons to your Gothic Europe at a moment's notice. (And finding the Gothic aspects of dragons can be a neat exercise in research to support a preconceived notion.) Making Dracula a half-dragon is going to be even more fun than making him a vampire, because the players won't expect it. If a fact is fresh and exciting to you, you have a much better chance of making it fresh and exciting to your players. The same thing is true about research—if you're looking something up because you think it's cool, you're more likely to have fun with it than if you feel it's "homework for the game." Your fun will translate into everyone's fun.

- *Fake it.* Don't do any more research than you have to. After a while, you can just apply knowledge across genres: If Renaissance Florence worked one way, you can pretty much assume that any rich, corrupt city works the same way. As long as your players don't have degrees in urban history, the false confidence you get from unjustified assumptions will work just as well as the real confidence you get from two months' reading. Faking it is also faster than real work. If you have a good general idea of your setting, your intuitive guess right now is going to be a lot more useful to you and the players than the academically correct answer next week. If someone calls you on it, shrug uncaringly—if their correction doesn't affect the game (or makes it better),

## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

make it retroactively true and move on. If it breaks game continuity or makes the world more tedious, ignore it. Chances are you have something else a lot stranger in your world—vampires, magic, etheric Babbage engines—than a picayune sideslip into alternate history. It's your world; they just game in it.

## A Final Thought

*"Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities. Truth isn't."*

— Mark Twain

# Fiendishly Good: Creating Memorable Villains for Your Campaigns

by John R. Phythyon, Jr.

Copyright ©2002 by John R. Phythyon, Jr.

Confession time: I love villains. The bad guys are my favorite part of a good thriller or action movie. At the age of 10, while watching *Star Wars*, I was rooting for Darth Vader. *Die Hard* isn't half as cool a film without Alan Rickman's performance as the villainous Hans Gruber. And the measure of any James Bond film is not taken (in my estimation) by the man who played Bond or the caliber of the stunts. It's the villain and his fiendish scheme that make it work.

I have occasionally kicked around the idea of designing an RPG specifically allowing the players to take the roles of the bad guys. The heroes of the story are the antagonists, not the villains. But I haven't done it yet, and I'm not sure I ever will. It just doesn't seem fair to the gamemaster. After all, it's the GM who puts in all the work to design the campaign, come up with stories, and keep his or her players entertained. Why should the players get to have all the fun? Reserve the best part for the GM: playing the bad guys.

Playing villains is fun, but it's not always easy. A dull villain can be as bad as a dull plot (sometimes worse). What are the heroes to do if they don't have a

fiendish plot to overcome and a dastardly nogoodnik to defeat? In my opinion, a good villain is the key to a successful RPG campaign, and this essay is aimed at helping you create memorable ones for both you and your players to enjoy.

## The Basics

Before we can examine what makes a good villain, it's important to understand what a villain is, how he works in a story, and how you can apply those ideas to a roleplaying campaign.

### Definition

Stories and, by way of association, roleplaying games are driven by conflict. Conflict has a broader definition than simply combat, though. A conflict is anything that prevents the protagonists from accomplishing their goals. Thus, conflict can be a big fight with a fire-breathing dragon, but it can also be something as simple as a locked door or a missing clue. The obstacle that prevents the hero from fulfilling his quest creates conflict.

In essence, villains are simply another form of conflict. They are obstacles that heroes must overcome to accomplish their goals. It can be helpful to see them in this light, since you can view designing an entertaining villain in the same way that you might create an insidious trap. Put some thought into it, put it at a place in the adventure where it interferes with what the players most want to do, and force them to deal with it in a creative manner before they overcome the challenge it presents.

Of course, it's not quite that simple. Villains require personality and other things that a simple trap does not, but at the most basic level there's little difference between a maniacal overlord and a yawning gorge. Each presents a problem for the heroes to overcome.

### Creating a Challenge

Given the view of a villain as a conflict-creating obstacle, it's important to remember that villains (good ones, anyway) must present challenges to the hero. The obstacle the villain presents has to be one that the protagonist can't just easily surmount. It requires willpower, skill, luck, strength, intelligence, or perhaps all of those traits for the hero to succeed. Smaug is no ordinary challenge for Bilbo Baggins and company. He

# ADVENTURES FROM THE MASTERS

isn't just an obstacle between them and the treasure hoard. He's enormous, breathes fire, and is nearly invulnerable. Defeating him is no mean feat.

The villains you'll want to employ in your campaign should be similar. The characters shouldn't be able to surmount the challenges they present simply by charging in, guns blazing. They may ultimately deal with the villain by blowing him or her away in the final confrontation, but before that they'll have to figure out how to do so.

Remember that villains are obstacles just as traps or locked doors are. While a locked door may seem like only a small challenge, if it's sealed off, can only be opened by a complex electronic password, is the only way out, and stands between the heroes and certain doom, it becomes a huge challenge. Likewise, the sinister trap that must be defused before the protagonist can collect the treasure, and will bring the temple crashing down if it is set off, presents a serious challenge for player characters seeking to complete their mission. Villains are the same way. They should be more than simple obstacles. They create the greatest challenges for the heroes to face before their missions can be accomplished.

## Causal Force

Unlike other obstacles such as the locked door or the temple trap mentioned above, villains do not simply stand in the way of success. Villains create the situations and reasons for the quest. While most stories and all roleplaying campaigns are about the exploits of the heroic protagonist, it is the villains who make the stories happen. Villains are the causal forces behind the plots of action-adventure tales.

When Darth Vader abducts Princess Leia, it forces her to store the information on the *Death Star* in R2-D2's memory banks. The little 'droid is found by Luke Skywalker, and when our hero discovers the princess is in danger, he sets off on a quest to rescue her.

When the government discovers that Hitler is search-

ing for the fabled Ark of the Covenant and that he just might succeed, Indiana Jones is hired to find it before the Nazis. When Elektra King's father is murdered in what appears to be an elaborate revenge plot, James Bond is sent out to protect her while drawing the fiendish terrorist, Renard, into a confrontation.

The villains of these stories drive the plots. If Darth Vader doesn't kidnap Princess Leia before she can deliver the stolen data to Alderaan, Luke Skywalker will never become involved in the quest to rescue her. If King isn't murdered, M has no reason to send 007 into the field to uncover the plot behind his death. Villains make it all possible. Without them, heroes have little to do. They're just ordinary people.

## Building a Good Villain

Knowing what makes up a villain isn't the same as creating one that your players will love to hate. Now we'll examine the components you'll need to craft truly memorable villains for your campaigns.

### Motivation

"What's my motivation?" goes the old actors' line. The question is simple: Why am I doing whatever the script calls for me to do? Your villains should be asking the same question.

Every person has a reason for doing the things he or she does. Whether they be good, bad, or neither, a person's actions are the result of motivations. Thus, the bad guys don't just plunder a village, kidnap a princess, or steal the magical jewel for no reason. There is always a purpose to their actions. By asking yourself why the villain

chooses to take the actions that he or she does (and knowing the answers), you take the first step toward creating a memorable antagonist for your PCs.

Perhaps the fiend plunders the village because it once gave refuge to his sworn enemy. Maybe he kidnapped the princess because she once spurned his love, and he's decided she'll marry him no matter what. It might

**“By asking yourself why the villain chooses to take the actions that he or she does (and knowing the answers), you take the first step toward creating a memorable antagonist for your PCs.”**



# SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

be that the villain needs that magical jewel to complete a ritual that will take her one step closer to godhood. These are all logical motivations for the actions of a villain.

Motivation doesn't have to be obvious, either. Sometimes there is a driving force behind the driving force. For instance, a fiend may simply be carrying out orders from a superior. The antagonist might be compelled to act a certain way (making him or her more of a victim or a tragic hero than a villain). Perhaps he or she is possessed, or another villain is holding the character's true love hostage and forcing his or her actions.

You can be even more complex than that. Suppose the villain is driven by an insatiable lust for revenge. In this case, you have an "outside force" driving him or her (the need for revenge) while simultaneously having the character compelled by forces beyond his control. The need for revenge acts as a kind of possession. If he or she could just let go of this obsession, the villain would be freed of the motivation to commit depravity. Since that's not possible, the acts of villainy continue. That's a complex motivation.

In the end, what matters is not what the villain's motivation is but that there is one. No one does things "just because," certainly not a powerful deviant with heroic adventurers with which to contend. While a character might use the rather weak motive of "doing it for the sake of pure Evil," that's still a motivation. Give your villains some depth and your players will have more fun defeating them.

## Creating a Challenge (Again)

Remember that we established that one of the jobs of the villain in the context of the story was to present the heroes with a challenge to overcome in the fulfillment of their quest. Usually, defeating the villain is the greatest challenge of the adventure. However, just as the antagonist acts as an obstacle to be overcome, he must also *be* challenging to the heroes of the story. If the final confrontation between good guys and bad results in our heroes effortlessly dispatching the fiend, the conclusion of the adventure isn't very satisfying. There's no sense of accomplishment, no catharsis.

The villains need to challenge your PCs. By that, I mean that RPG villains should be powerful foes that are difficult to defeat. That doesn't mean that they all have to be enormous dragons or deadly kung fu mas-



ters with the strength of Hercules. Those are good villain types, but they are only one kind of villain: the physically powerful that are difficult to defeat in combat. But a villain doesn't need a black belt to be a serious challenge to the player characters.

In many ways, an intelligent foe is the most dangerous kind. This type of bad guy thinks everything through. He or she is usually one step ahead of the heroes, setting traps for them, moving the operation, and thinking of variations before the PCs can create them. This character lets other people do the fighting and the dirty work. There are few things the villain could do for himself or herself that would not better be accomplished by a minion. Why do for yourself when others can do for you? Characters with this trait are often motivated by a desire to demonstrate to everyone how smart they are. The thoughtful, clever schemes they cook up are to be admired by everyone. That's even better when you've fooled, cajoled, or otherwise convinced others to do the work.

However, dimmer villains understand the value of a network too. It's a very rare individual who can conquer the world by himself or herself, even with magic

## LEARNING FROM THE MASTERS

on one's side. Even if you can, how are you supposed to go on vacation for a week or two if you don't have someone to leave in charge while you're gone? Trusted advisors, right-hand men and women, cannon-fodder soldiers, and armies of stooges are all part of a successful villain's arsenal. They carry out orders, act as intermediaries, and provide insulation from hostile forces (like do-gooder heroes).

Thus, for the PCs to be able to get to the fiend at the center of the adventure, they have to go through the minions first. The heroes fight a series of escalating battles until at last they are face to face with the mastermind. Then a final confrontation ensues that provides the ultimate resolution to the adventure. Give your villains this network of flunkies and force the players to crawl up through them. By the time they get to the villain in person, they'll be ready to dispatch this fiend. He or she will have created all sorts of trouble for them, and vanquishing the dastard will provide them with immense satisfaction.

Once they do get to that big climax, they should find the toughest challenge of the adventure. Even a villain who is weak compared to the PCs should be difficult to handle at the conclusion of the story. A fiendish mastermind will have taken great pains to make certain that, if it ever came down to it, he or she could stand and fight. An evil wizard may be frail, but he or she surely has an arsenal of spells and magical items at the ready. That mad terrorist may be outnumbered and outgunned, but she has the place wired with enough explosives to blow it to kingdom come if anything happens to her. Holing up in an ancient temple with numerous booby traps is as effective a way of keeping the heroes from getting to you as beating them into bloody pulps.

The point is that the main villain is always the hardest to take. The player characters have to wade through a sea of traps and minions to get to him or her, and then they have to take on the main bad guy, who's even worse. Luke Skywalker has all sorts of trouble with Darth Vader, but the Sith Lord is a walk in the park compared to his sinister master, Emperor Palpatine.

So load that principle foe up so that he or she can give the PCs a real run for their money. It's important to remember that, in the end, the final confrontation will likely be a four (or more) on one as your PCs gang up on the antagonist who's been causing them so much trouble. Make sure you take that into account when

designing your villains.

## Hate is Good

Villains drive the plot, are motivated to do evil, and present the ultimate challenge for heroic adventurers, but all of those qualities still do little to distinguish them from a complex trap. While it's true that a trap has no motivations and this aspect of the formula serves to give them some depth, what makes a good villain truly memorable is the hatred the hero and, by way of association, the audience feels for him or her. If your players detest the villain not because he's the bad guy but because he's a real heel, the quest to stop this fiend will be much more memorable and satisfying.

Smaug is a classic example. He's not a great villain because he's a dangerous, fire-breathing dragon. If that were the only thing that made him reprehensible, one could actually turn the tables on Bilbo and the dwarves, seeing them as thieves and interlopers taking what doesn't belong to them. However, Smaug has no use for the treasure hoard. He's just using it for a bed and luxuriating in his possession of it. He doesn't use it to feed the hungry children. He doesn't need it to run his kingdom. He just wants it, and he keeps it all to himself. Smaug is selfish, greedy, and slothful. That makes him a lot easier to hate.

This is only one way to make a villain despicable, but you'll want to remember the technique when you are designing foes for your PCs. Players will enjoy defeating enemies they hate more than ones they don't. So have the rampaging warlord burn the village to the ground, leaving no one alive. Have the evil witch kill the king's daughter out of spite. Have the dark overlord tax the peasants into oblivion. Players want to hate the foes they face. Give them cause to do just that.

## Customizing to Your Campaign

Up to this point, everything we've discussed has been pretty general. They are basic concepts of what the villain is to an adventure and what the basic components of a good one are. However, you still have to apply that information to your own campaign.

## Hit Them Where They Live

# SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

Nothing makes people angrier than when you make a personal attack on their possessions or their loved ones. If you really want to motivate a player to hunt down and destroy the bad guy in the adventure, have the fiend attack the player's character in some personal way.

Kidnap his girlfriend. Kill her brother. Steal his gold. Ruin her reputation. Frame him for a crime he didn't commit. Have the villain make a victim out of the hero, and you'll have a player who is highly motivated to take the fiend out once and for all.

In a sense, this is all very logical. You're not just picking on the PCs to motivate them. You're incorporating their lives into the verisimilitude of your campaign world. When the PCs start messing with the villain's plans, the villain is naturally going to want them stopped. This can take the direct form of an attempt on their lives, but most villains like to send a message. They want to warn anyone else away from taking similar action. A good tyrant wants it known that if you mess with him or her, not only will you suffer, your family, your friends, and your pets will all suffer too. It's a preventive maintenance sort of thing. Scare 'em off before they get any ideas in their heads.

Thus, if the PCs go after the bad guys, they should expect that there may be consequences. Just as they are trying to get the villain, he or she will try to get them. While the villain might not succeed in actually killing them or stopping them, he or she might hurt them before finally succumbing. This helps maintain verisimilitude in your world and serves to motivate the players into wanting to bring their antagonist down.

## Get Personal

Another way to motivate players is to create villains that do the sorts of things that the individual personally despises. If you have a player with strong Marxist leanings in your group, for example, a tyrannical overlord who overtaxes the peasants while reclining in opulence and ignoring their pleas for succor makes a good villain. The overlord represents exactly the kind of person our example Marxist would hate. Thus, the player will have a motivation beyond whatever the character would have to bring the enemy down.

**“There are few things more frustrating than having your goal just within reach only to see it slip away a moment later.”**

You have to be careful here, though. Not everyone enjoys having their weaknesses exposed and baited in this manner, and even those who do often have limits to what they can comfortably stand. Don't rub someone raw, and don't poke at issues a player doesn't

want to explore. The last thing you want to do is offend the very people you are hoping to entertain. Make sure you know your friends and their limits well before setting out to deliberately inflame sensitive issues.

## Give Your Villains Experience

On a more technical level, I strongly recommend giving your villains some experience. In many campaigns, the villain starts out really powerful in comparison to the PCs. Then the player characters get a ton of experience, and all of a sudden they are so much mightier than the bad guy that taking him or her on at the end of the adventure isn't challenging.

Instead, I recommend making sure that the villain gets a fair shake in experience. You can come up with any number of ways to determine how much experience the bad guy gets over the course of an adventure, but I've found the easiest way is to average the amount the PCs receive and give that number to the villain.

Have the bad guys spend their experience too. It doesn't do any good sitting there on their character sheets. The idea is for them to improve. That way they become more of a challenge for the PCs to defeat in the end.

Don't cheat for the villains, though. Whatever method you use for granting experience and spending it for the PCs should be the same one the villains have to use. They get their experience and spend it the same way and the same time that the PCs can. Treat them special, and players will complain.

## Recurring Villains

One of the things that made Ernst Stavro Blofeld such a good villain was that he kept getting away. James Bond would foil his schemes, but Blofeld always seemed to slip out the back so that he could return to fight another day. A villain like this in your campaign

# TECHNIQUES FROM THE MASTERS

will not only add consistency and a long-running plot, he or she will serve to motivate the players to bring him or her down. There are few things more frustrating than having your goal just within reach only to see it slip away a moment later. By creating this kind of frustration for your players, they stay interested. The goal (finally defeating the evil fiend) isn't yet complete.

The recurring villain motif can be used several ways. You can have a long string of adventures with the PCs chasing the fiend from adventure to adventure until they finally run him or her to ground. Each time, the antagonist escapes in the final reel, only to return in the next adventure with a new plan.

Alternatively, you can space this out over a much longer time. The characters fight the villain, and he or she gets away somehow. Then the PCs have a few more unrelated adventures before our recurring fiend returns to haunt them again. A related technique is to have the villain be defeated but then return again later on. The villain gets out of jail or is resurrected or his evil twin takes over his empire.

You can also do a slow build-up over several stories wherein the main villain is behind everything the PCs encounter, but they don't actually face him or her until the very end. Thus, in the first adventure, they face Bad Guy X, whom they discover is working for Bad Guy Y, their foe in the second adventure. And so on until they finally face off with the real mastermind.

You can, of course, combine all of these techniques. Be careful, though, of making your players angry. They should at some point be able to defeat the villain once and for all. Typically, the serial villain technique works for about three to seven adventures. After that it becomes tiresome. The players want to feel that they can get this guy for good. Of course, there's nothing to say you can't introduce a new serial villain after the current one has been defeated.

## In Conclusion

The sad fact for a villain-lover like me is that, in the end, every bad guy has to lose. It's part of the formula, and it wouldn't be as fun otherwise. We don't really want the bad guys to win. It would mess with our sense of right and wrong. So as much as you love the villains you create, don't forget the relationship is only temporary. Sooner or later, your players will take them out. Make sure they get the chance to do so.

But have fun along the way. Being the GM allows you the opportunity to do all the things you yourself would never do (and perhaps wouldn't want to). The bad guys do them, though. As a GM, you get to wear the black hat and be villain for a day. Have fun! The story may be about the hero, his or her quest, and the self-actualization that results from the adventure. But the villain somehow makes it all happen and, done right, is the best part of the story. Love your villains so that your players will hate them. Sacrifice them to your PCs' need for conquest and reward your players for coming up with creative means for defeating these, your greatest creations. In the end, they will enjoy your campaigns much more. And so will you.

## Here Be Dragons: The Science and Art of Map Making

by Ann Dupuis

Copyright ©2002 by Ann Dupuis

While a picture may be worth a thousand words, a good map can be worth much more. As two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional spaces, maps contain a lot of data: size, locations, relationships to other areas, political or social boundaries, transportation networks, and much more. Maps serve as shorthand notes for the gamemaster, providing at a glance such information as "Lockenby Village lies on the southwestern edge of the Forbidden Forest" and "the eastern branch of the Grav Train line provides the best route to the spaceport." Maps can also serve as hand-outs and props to help the players envision the world their characters inhabit. Maps are essential tools for the gamemaster.

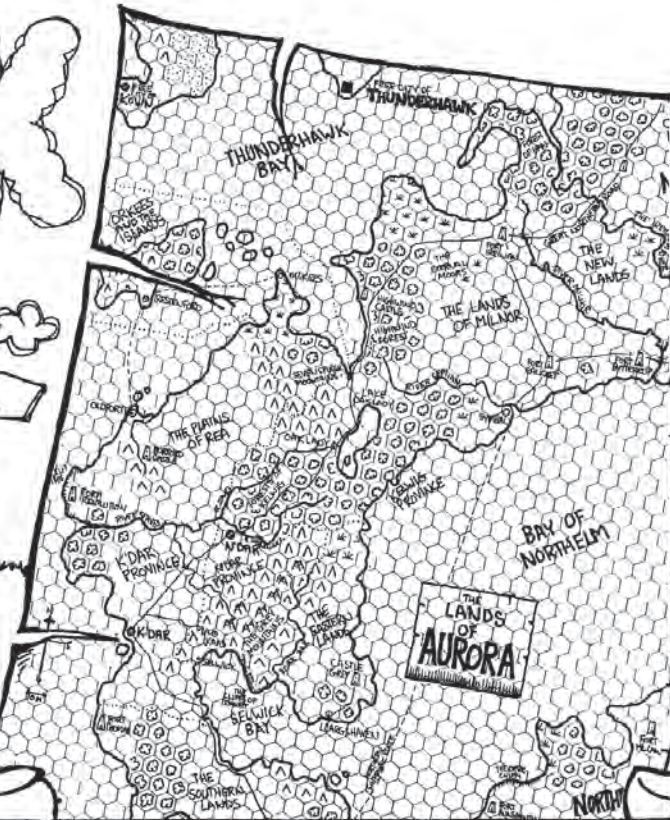
## Collecting Maps

Gamemasters are often map collectors by nature. I know that I for one can't resist the floorplan of an Egyptian tomb or a colorful map of the world. My bookshelves are crammed with atlases, reprinted collections of antique maps, books on city planning (complete with city plans, of course!), books covering archaeology and

# SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

## DOOR TOWER

BY JOHN KOVALIC



## TIPS FROM THE MASTERS

architecture, and so on. The library closet is full of *National Geographic* magazines, a rich source of maps of all types. A good map collection can make designing worlds and adventures much easier. The player characters are planning to steal the crown jewels? Pull out the floor plan of a European palace. Artifact hunters exploring an Egyptian tomb? There are plenty of tomb plans available, take your pick! The adventure takes place in a secret government lab? Use the floor plan of a real lab, complete with the placement of doors and the direction in which each opens! Fortunately, the World Wide Web provides easy-to-find maps that are free to download and cheap to print. Many universities have scanned their antique map collections for online viewing. You can find city plans from all continents and almost all historical eras, as well as regional and world maps. Topographical maps from the USGS can set the scene for an Old West game or provide geographical features to inspire you in developing areas of your own fantasy world. (For links to many of these online sources, please visit <http://www.gmsecrets.com>.) Map-rich books are often remaindered in the “bargain” sections of bookstores; likewise with books on archaeology, architecture, and general history. If your budget or shelf space is limited, many of these books can be found in your local library. Your Favorite Local Game Shop can be a source of maps designed for roleplaying games. Flying Buffalo publishes several generic map books (primarily for fantasy campaigns). Steve Jackson Games offers *Cardboard Heroes Dungeon Floors* (sheet-based tiles of dungeon architecture) and their Floor Plan and Deck Plan series—the former with generic floorplans (a haunted house, an underground lab, and a multilevel mall), the latter with spaceship deck plans for the *Traveller* game. *Dungeon Magazine* is a great source of maps for fantasy cities, towns, dungeons, and castles. And, of course, many commercial roleplaying game settings and supplements include maps. A good map collection can provide ready-to-use maps for your adventures as well as a source of templates and inspiration for maps you create yourself.

## Creating Maps

If you create your own campaign world or adventures, you may need to create your own maps as well. This can be as simple as pulling out a sheet of paper

and a pencil and getting to work. A rough sketch is all you really need to create a working map. Don't worry if you lack artistic talents. As long as your map contains the information you need and remains readable (to you, at least), it's a good map. If you go the high-tech route, you may use sophisticated CAD (computer-aided design) software, fractal mapping, and other computer tools to create your maps electronically, in full color with professional, commercial quality. More likely, your maps will fall somewhere between these extremes. But first let's discuss the “what's” of map-making. The “how's” come later (see “Map Drawing Techniques” below).

## Map Designs

Before you put pen to paper or launch your computer drawing program, you need to decide what sort of map you'll be making. Are you mapping an entire world or planet? A country? A town? A building or dungeon? The topic of your map will determine the information you need to include. Country (or continent) maps should include major geographical features, political boundaries, cities, important routes, and places of particular interest to the player characters. City maps should include major streets, city walls (if any), important buildings (government, religious, economic centers, etc.), and significant terrain features (rivers or harbors, hills). Floorplans should include rooms and corridors, doors (with notes on which way they open if you think it may be important during the game), stairs, architectural details (columns, balconies, vaulted ceilings), and other features that may be important to the game. The focus of your map will also help determine the type of map you need, the scale to draw it in, and any keys or accompanying information that may be required.

## Stellar Maps

If you're running a star-spanning science fiction campaign, you should have a star map to help keep track of what planets are where and how far apart they may be. Major space hazards such as black holes, asteroid fields, and nebulae should be marked, as should major travel routes, “wormhole” entrances, and political (or martial!) boundaries between stellar empires or alliances. Some science fiction settings divide space into “sec-

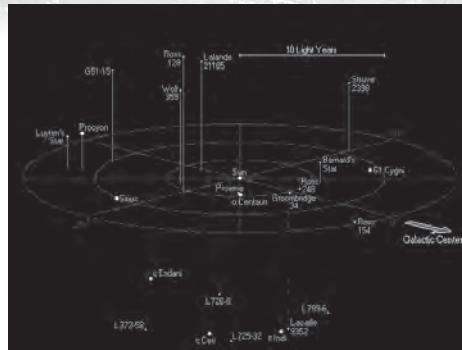
# SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

tors,” which should be marked on the star map. Perhaps the easiest way to create a star map is to borrow wholesale from reality—use scientifically accurate data from our own galaxy. Star charts and maps are available online and in many astronomy books. You can use “real world” data for a galaxy of your own creation; file off the “serial numbers” (the real-world star designations) and put your own names to the stellar objects on the map. This can work especially well if you choose an area of space that’s not well known to the average player—stars that are not in close proximity to our own Sol. While it will be harder to find an actual star map of areas of space that aren’t close to Earth, you can take the known data—star locations and types, etc., available from many astronomy databases—and translate that to your own maps.

When creating your own space setting with completely made-up stellar objects, keep in mind that most of space is boring. In the Milky Way galaxy, nearly 80% of all stars are small red dwarfs unlikely to support habitable planets. Exciting things such as black holes, pulsars, and quasars are relatively rare. You’re welcome to liven things up as you see fit, of course, but filling your star charts and adventures with unusual and weird phenomena may lessen the sense of wonder that players (and their characters) will feel when encountering truly awesome stellar objects. Some science-fiction roleplaying games provide star creation tables and rules you can use as guides when creating your own star systems, or you can make your own tables based on the percentages and distributions of star types in the real world. Astrophysics textbooks and online resources can help you determine the ratios of star types and theoretical distribution of planetary bodies if you’re interested in taking a semiscientific approach to creating your own galaxy.

## Stellar Map Types

Stellar maps represent truly three-dimensional spaces, with the vertical axis being more important than for most maps. (Even Mount Everest’s elevation is tiny in comparison to the vast expanse of the Earth, whereas



“The Universe within 12.5 Light Years” ©2002 by Richard Powell, from *An Atlas of the Universe*, <http://www.anzwers.org/free/universe/>.

a star that is 10 light years away from the Imperial Capital as measured on the horizontal axes may also be 10 light years above or below the horizontal plane.) There are three basic approaches to representing this three-dimensional data in a star map. The first, suitable for “space opera” campaigns where the story is more important than scientific accuracy, is simply to ignore the three-dimensionality of space and draw your stars

in two dimensions. The second approach is to create a simple grid with the main star (Sol, for example) at the 0,0,0 coordinates of the  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$  axes. Ignore the  $z$  axis and place all stellar objects on the  $x$  and  $y$  grid as appropriate. Next to (or below) the name for each object, note the  $x,y,z$  coordinates (+3.13, +1.49, -1.01 for Tau Ceti, for example). The third approach is to use artists’ tricks of perspective to create a more three-dimensional representation. Use a circular grid with radial lines to designate relative positions, then use foreshortening (representing the circle as an oval) to give the impression that the viewer is looking at the radial grid from slightly above its plane. Place the stars above or below this plane as necessary (to match their  $z$  coordinates) and draw a dotted line from the star to its  $x$  and  $y$  coordinates (measured in light-years along the plane for  $x$  and in degrees from the direction of galactic center for  $y$ ).

## Stellar Map Scale and Keys

Distances on stellar maps are usually measured in light years. Parsecs are also a good unit of measurement (representing a “parallax second,” roughly 3.26 light years). The Tau Ceti coordinates listed on the simple grid map are in parsecs. The more complex radial grid shown above uses light years.

A star map’s key should include a directional indicator (e.g., “galactic center,” or “spinward” and “coreward”). The key should also include star types if indicated on the map (by color, size/shape, or other method). An accompanying list of stellar objects with brief notes is also helpful. For a “space opera” two-dimensional map, you may wish to include a table of “Distances between Stars” to make up for the fact that

# SECRETS FROM THE MASTERS

the third dimension is missing from the data presented in the map. If you don't wish to go to the trouble of applying geometry to determine the actual distances (taking the missing vertical axis into account), measure the distance in "travel time" rather than light years or parsecs. You can then tell at a glance that in an "average" starship it'll take three weeks to get from Planet A to Planet B without worrying so much about actual relative position and distance.

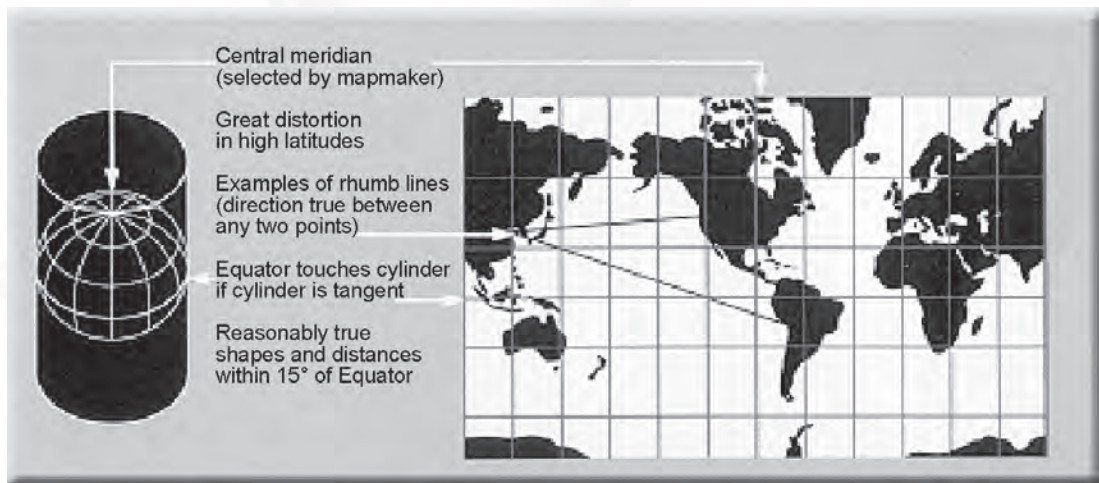
## Planetary and World Maps

The only truly accurate representation of a world (such as the Earth or another planetary body) is a globe. When translating the surface of a planet into a two-dimensional image, some or all of directions, distances, shapes, and areas must be distorted. Even a more focused map concentrating on a single continent will suf-

fer some distortion. That is, unfortunately, the nature of mapping a three-dimensional object onto a two-dimensional representation. If you wish to create accurate maps of an entire world, you should familiarize yourself with the various types of map projection techniques (such as Mercator, Miller Cylindrical, and Robinson). Such information is outside the scope of this article but can be found online for those wishing to apply sophisticated cartographic techniques to their gaming maps. There are also computer programs that can help you create realistic planets and maps of their surfaces.

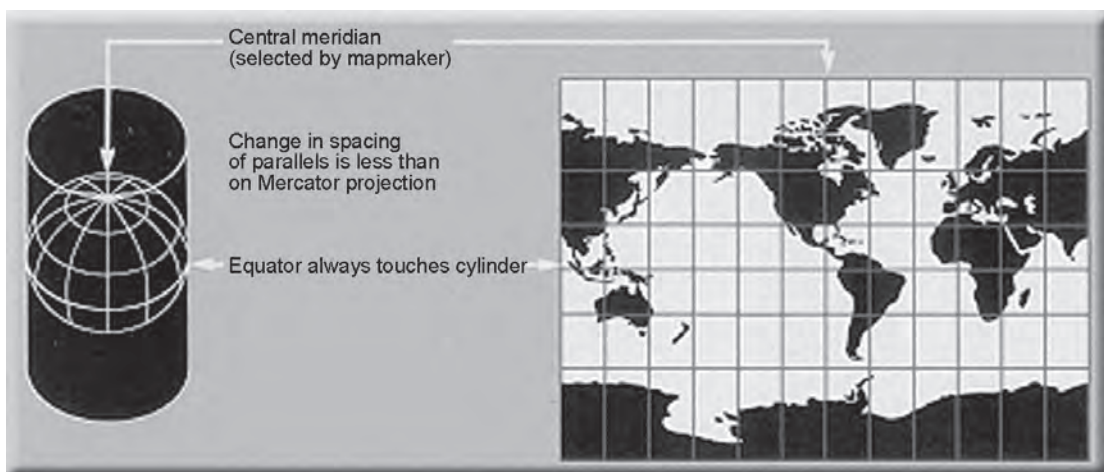
The biggest problem with using world maps in games is when you're measuring distances to determine travel times. On a typical world map of Earth using the popular Mercator or Miller projections, distances measured along the edge of the Arctic Circle use a scale that's nearly three times larger than that used at the Equator.

Mercator Projection. Directions are true; distances, areas, and shapes are distorted (distortion increases away from equator).



From the USGS "Map Projections" Web page (<http://mac.usgs.gov/mac/isb/pubs/MapProjections/projections.html>).

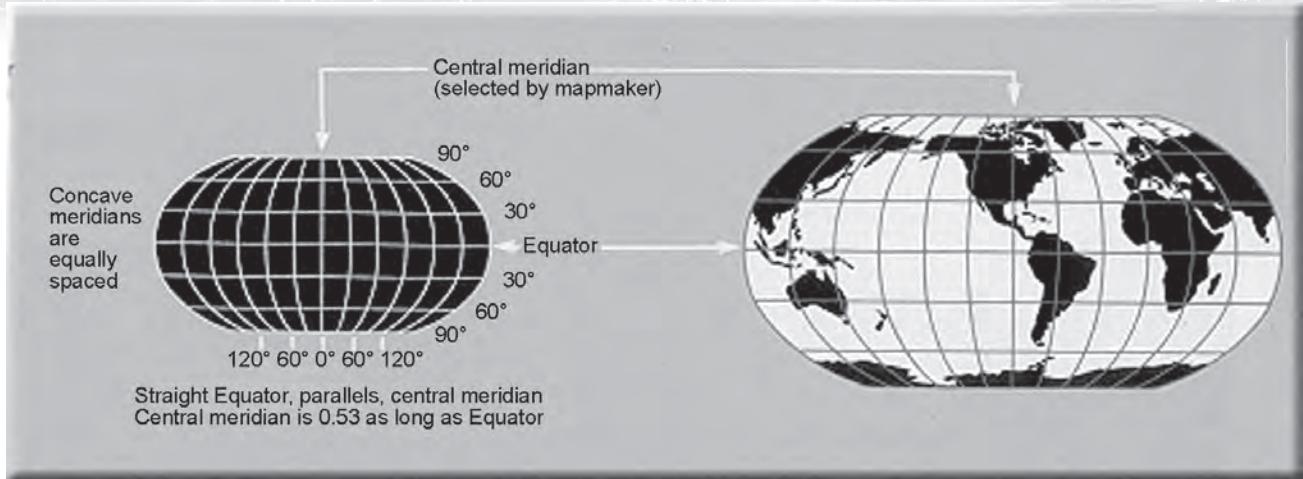
Miller Cylindrical Projection. Scale exaggerations are less than with the Mercator projection, but directions and distances are true only along the equator. Distances, areas, and shapes are extremely distorted in high latitudes.



From the USGS "Map Projections" Web page (<http://mac.usgs.gov/mac/isb/pubs/MapProjections/projections.html>).



# SECRETS FROM THE MASTERS



Robinson Projection. Directions are true along parallels and central meridian. Distances are constant along the Equator and other parallels (scales vary). Distortion is low along the Equator and within 45% of the center, greater at the poles. From the USGS "Map Projections" Web page (<http://mac.usgs.gov/mac/isb/pubs/MapProjections/projections.html>).

If you draw a straight line east to west across Canada or Russia, and a line of the same length at the Equator, the line at the Equator will represent a distance roughly three times longer than the same length of line at a much more northern (or southern) latitude. (Different map projections will of course have scales that vary from this rough approximation.) Directions may also not be accurate, depending on the projection used. Keep these distortions in mind when creating or using world maps, especially when creating larger-scale maps for specific regions based on the world map. Obviously, if you're building a "flat" fantasy world, you can ignore map projection techniques entirely. Flat worlds are easy to portray in two-dimensional maps, although they come with their own sets of problems, including requiring different physical laws to account for gravity.

If your campaign setting is based on real-world Earth, you'll be able to find maps of the world and any regions you're interested in online or in atlases at your local bookstore or library. If you're creating your own world, you can still use Earth maps. Turn some places upside down or sideways, or use maps of Earth in much earlier ages, before continental drift separated the land masses into their current configurations. You can also use topographic maps of Earth and raise the sea level to create a "water planet" with island chains where current mountain ranges are, or lower the sea level to create a world with much more land. You can ignore the effects altered sea levels would have on weather pat-

terns, unless you wish to research meteorology and weather patterns. You can use real maps of other planets, as well. The topography of Mars, with atmosphere, heat, water, and life added, would make a splendid world to explore. Likewise with Venus: Cool the planet down, alter its atmosphere, give it oceans of water rather than acid, and populate it with whatever life forms strike your fancy.

## World Map Types

World maps cover a lot of territory without very much detail. The simplest world maps show the approximate shapes and sizes of land masses versus bodies of water. More complex world maps may show major geographical features (significant lakes and rivers, mountain ranges, deserts), political boundaries, or climate zones. If the world map portrays a fantasy setting or an Earth historical era prior to the twentieth century, there may be large areas marked "Unexplored" or "Unknown" or even "Here Be Dragons." (There is only *one* authentic antique map that includes the legendary "Here Be Dragons" phrase: *The Lennox Globe*, circa the early 1500's, which bears the phrase "HC SVNT DRACONES" on the eastern coast of Asia. But that shouldn't stop you from using "Here Be Dragons" or "Here Be Monsters" if you like!) A planetary map representing a first-reconnaissance situation in a science-fiction campaign should have major geographical and climate-related

# TOOLS FROM THE MASTERS

features marked, as this information can be garnered from sensor data. It would have little or no information on political boundaries (assuming it's inhabited by one or more intelligent species) or specific species data (flora or fauna). That level of detail would have to wait for more in-depth surveys and the reports of "away teams."

## World Map Scales and Keys

Scale, as a measure of distance, is rarely useful on a global map. Instead, use latitude and longitude to allow you to approximate distances. The actual distance between two latitudinal lines depends on the circumference of the planet being mapped. The distance between two longitudinal lines varies, being widest at the equator and tapering to 0 at either pole.

A world map's key should include the projection type you're using (if applicable) plus a legend for the primary data included on the map. Examples include color coding for terrain types (forest, desert, mountain); symbols for capital cities, religious centers, and the like; and a key for the various lines representing trade routes or shipping lanes or what have you. You may also want to include scale as measured at the equator. The latitude/longitude grid needn't necessarily have the same orientations as is standard on Earth maps (longitudinal lines converging on the coldest portions, latitudinal lines centering on a tropical equator), especially for planets that don't have the axial tilt the Earth has. Using this standard equator/poles orientation on planets that have arctic regions at opposite poles will help facilitate understanding the map at a glance.

## Regional Maps

Regional maps may cover anything from an entire continent down to a town and its immediate environs. Smaller areas allow you to portray more details; larger areas require more general information. Regional maps, even those covering entire continents, allow more detail than world maps do. Real-world maps are rich sources of inspiration and geographical "templates" you can mine when creating a regional map. Need mountain terrain in the Dwarven Empire? Trace a map of the Rockies! Need to know how many rivers the player characters must cross in their quest? Pick a real-world location with similar terrain and climate and use a map



A Map of the Rivers and Lakes of Maine

of the rivers and streams as a template!

## Regional Map Types

A map of a continent may include major geographical features (mountain ranges, significant rivers, plains, coastlines), important cities, political boundaries (nations, states, or what have you), and major trade or transportation routes. Large continents will suffer from the same mapping distortions world maps do, although not to the same degree. As with world maps, regional maps that include sufficient territory may have "blank" areas—the depths of the "forbidden forest" about which little is known, a notation of "Here Live the Fierce Nomadic Horsemen" with little geographical detail in the steppelands, and other examples of *terra incognita*. Larger-scale maps showing smaller regions (a state, small kingdom, duchy, or earldom) can contain more detailed data. Examples include minor (as well as major) rivers, towns and villages, and locations of ruins and other sites of interest. It may be useful to have both a small-scale regional map (showing the continent) and

## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

larger-scale regional maps (showing specific regions within the continent).

### Regional Map Scales and Keys

Distances on regional maps will usually be measured in miles or kilometers. You can substitute leagues (about 7 miles) or other measuring systems that suit the setting you're presenting. An alternative scale could measure area rather than linear distance: acres, hectares, square miles, etc.

A regional map key should indicate the scale used. With area-derived scale, include a square of the right size to indicate the scale of an acre (or hectare, or square mile). Alternatively, overlay a grid with the scale indicated on the map itself (as with longitude and latitude lines on a planetary map). The grid may be square or hexagonal, or follow the curves of latitude and longitude if covering a large continent. In this latter case, "scale" would most likely be indicated as degrees and minutes of latitude and longitude. Regional maps should have a compass rose or similar indication of direction. (North does not have to be "up.") If you've drawn dashed or dotted lines to trace trade routes or political boundaries, the key should identify each line type used. Terrain types can also be defined: hunter green for forest if using color-coding, representative tree icons for a more illustrative method. You can also use the map key to present information such as population sizes of cities, languages spoken in each area, average widths of important rivers, or any other information that can be presented at a glance. This information doesn't need to be reflected on the map itself. While you can choose different-sized circles to indicate city population levels, the key could simply list major cities with their population level instead.

### City and Town Maps

Regional maps can show where cities and towns are located, but it's handy to have a map of the town itself when the player characters enter the city gates, stroll down Main Street, or take the grav train to Central Station for a night on the town. Urban maps can aid the GM in plot development by helping to answer a question such as "What buildings will be affected by the fire started in the fight between the PCs and the supervillain" (or, perhaps more importantly, what people will be affected and how might they react?).

Detailed maps can also answer questions such as "Where's the bank?" and "What's the best way to get out of town—in a hurry?" You can find maps of towns and cities from archaeological reconstructions of Babylon to detailed street maps of London and its Underground. If a historical or modern city of Earth isn't close enough to what you need, you can at least use these maps as templates and sources of ideas when creating your own city plans.

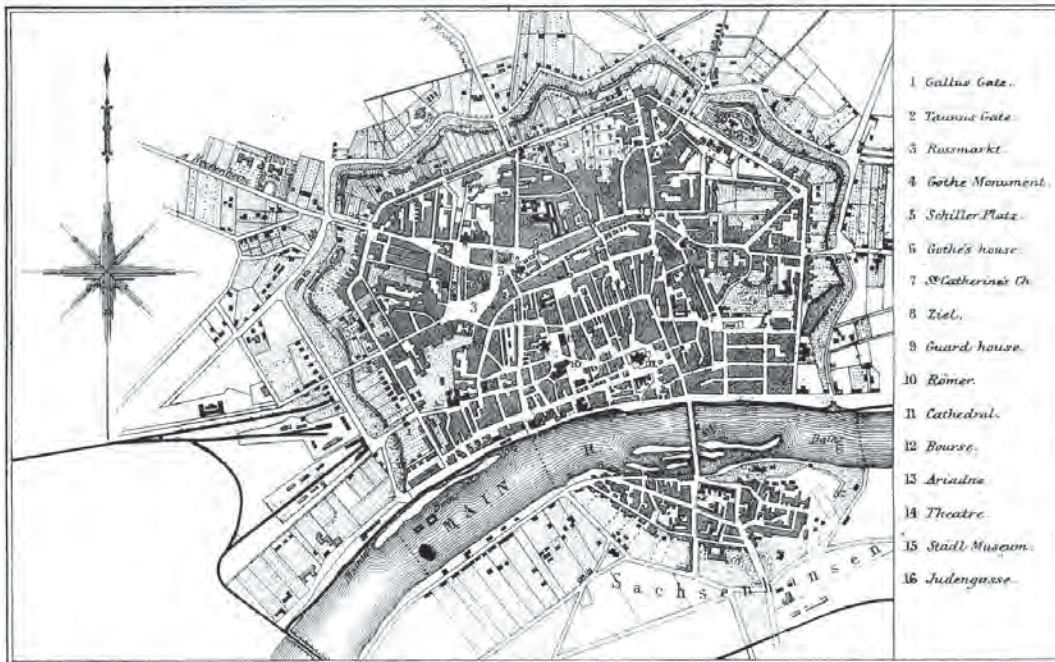
The first question to ask yourself when city-building is, "Why is this city or town here?" There are two major types of cities, "organic" and "planned." Organic cities or towns grow up around one or more features (their initial reasons for being there) and evolve over time. A typical medieval city is likely to be "organic," with narrow winding streets that follow the contours of the local terrain and use every available inch of space. There may be one or more sets of city walls, with the city having sprawled out beyond its bounds at various times in the past. In this case, the inner walls will be older than the outer walls and may be only ruins, having been scavenged for building material. Such cities tend to "grow" outside the gates first, gradually spreading over the best terrain for building and tending to go around marshy areas or other undesirable or difficult terrain.

Rivers are a particularly common reason for organic cities to be where they are. The site of a ford may warrant a small town, which can grow into a city if other factors such as trade routes, military defensive positions, or religious significance come into play. Good river port sites will also tend to "grow" urban centers. Crossroads are another such organic feature, especially when located at the junction of major commercial routes. Sources of wealth (ore, rich agriculture, raw materials needed by craftsmen) will also attract settlements that may grow into substantial towns or cities. In times of trouble, sites that have natural defensive advantages are invaluable. Such sites are often located on the "high ground" of an area, or will be bounded by natural features that serve as obstacles to aggressors (such as cliffs, or bodies of water large or swift enough to hamper crossing).

Planned communities are different beasts. Washington, D.C. is an example of a planned city, its location and initial building and street layout dictated by the government. Many Roman towns were also planned.

SECRETS FROM THE MASTERS

FRANKFORT



Example of an Organic City (Frankfurt, Germany)

Appleton's European Guide Book

Malby & Sons London

Company towns, such as mining towns, are often planned. A lunar base will certainly be planned as well. A planned city is usually laid out on a grid, with streets as straight as the terrain will allow. It may have a central square for governmental buildings or for commerce.

of a “better life”—jobs, government hand-outs, and rich pickings for scam artists and thieves will attract populations to cities. Disease and poverty take their toll, though, and many cities need a constant influx of new inhabitants to maintain their population levels. When

Cities and towns need four things to be able to thrive: water, food, commerce, and population. (In some cases, “commerce” can be replaced with “government,” although most capital cities will be rich in both.) If any of these are missing, they’ll need to be imported. Aqueducts and pipelines will solve water problems; efficient transportation networks will help bring in food and commerce. Population will usually follow the promise



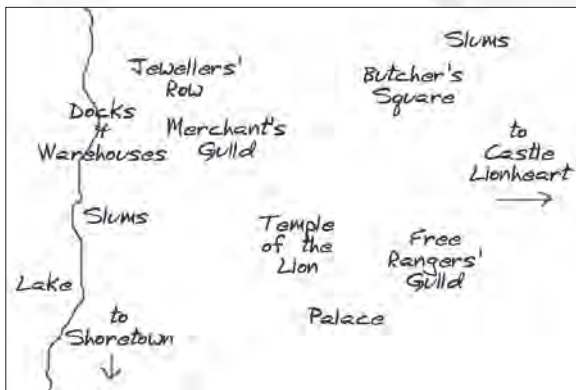
Example of a Planned City (Washington, D.C.)

# SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

situations conspire to deprive a population center of one or more of its necessities, the city will suffer a decline. This may lead to warrens of abandoned and deteriorating buildings (favorite hide-outs for thieves and beggars), or even “ghost towns” and ruins. When determining how large a city should be, keep in mind that through most of Earth’s history even large cities housed fewer than 50,000 inhabitants. Only the largest cities were home to 100,000 or more people. It wasn’t until the advent of efficient agriculture and transportation networks that cities were able to support populations in the millions. London boasted a million inhabitants in 1811; Paris claimed the same in 1846.

## City Map Types

City maps can range from the simple to the highly detailed. The simplest type of city map shows only the relative location of important places within the city (City Hall, the Merchant’s Guild, Jewellers’ Row, Farmers’ Market, Temple of the Lion, etc.). This is easily done by writing the site names down on a piece of paper in positions approximating where the places of interest would be on a “real” city map. There’s no need to show



streets or buildings or other detail if all you need to know is what’s where.

Example of a Basic City Map

General city maps may show no more than the city outline and the surrounding area, including major features such as rivers, coastlines, hills, and possibly outlying settlements. Where appropriate, a general map may include the outline of the city walls or other details. Slightly more detailed maps can show “districts” or “quarters” where the general city outline is filled in with only the most major streets with labels for the dis-

tricts they bound. The divisions within the city will depend on the setting’s time period, culture, and technology level. Medieval or fantasy cities may show the religious quarter, the merchants’ quarter, the military or government quarter, the thieves’ quarter (or slums), etc. Modern city maps may have districts labeled “Financial,” “Residential,” “Cultural,” “Industrial,” and so on.

Semi-detailed maps will show major streets, major buildings (their locations if not their outlines), and city blocks. Detailed maps may show each building, street, and alleyway. This is impractical with very large cities (a modern street map of London is usually published in book form with more than 100 pages), but you can always

produce a detailed map of important areas within a city while the main map holds much less detail. Some maps may include topographical or terrain data for the city. This is especially useful in places like San Francisco, where the topography may be important to plot or descriptive “flavor.” (Who hasn’t seen San Francisco car-chase scenes where the cars are almost literally flying down the hills?)

## City Map Scales and Keys

Typical city map scales will show miles or kilometers. Depending on the size of the city, the scale may be in half- or quarter-mile marks. Villages may have scales measured in yards or meters.

A city map legend should show scale, direction, and possibly a key for major buildings, squares, markets, monuments, and other sites marked on the map. Districts may be color-coded.



Map of Modern Jerusalem  
 (1) Christian Quarter  
 (2) Mohammedan Quarter  
 (3) Armenian Quarter  
 (4) Jewish Quarter  
 (T) Site of Ancient Temple

Example of a City “District” Map with Major Streets and Terrain

# ADVENTURES FROM THE MASTER



Example of Topographical City Map (Carchemish, a Hittite City)

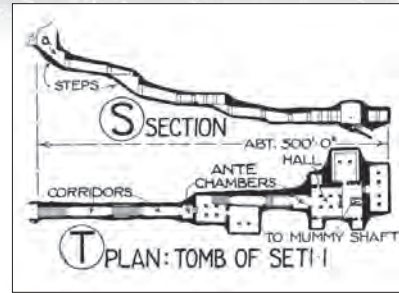
## Dungeon Maps and Floorplans

Detailed floorplans and maps of underground complexes are a staple of roleplaying games. They're especially useful when "dungeon-crawling." Such explore-the-underground-complex adventures aren't limited to fantasy adventures. Victorian and pulp heroes have their tombs and catacombs; modern spies and special-ops teams are faced with secret government labs and military bases; space explorers may encounter ancient alien ruins. Once again, the Internet is a marvelous source of real-world floorplans and detailed maps of cave systems and man-made underground structures. You can find everything from the layout of the Coliseum in Rome to university and government building plans online.

### Floorplan Types

Floorplans include anything from a quick sketch of the general layout of a building to detailed architectural drawings that show every nook and cranny, window, door, and even ventilation ducts. Unless you're studying architecture or creating an adventure for publication, these latter are probably best left to ready-made plans you can "borrow" for your games. Such detail may be wasted in a typical dungeon-crawl adventure.

Some floorplans will need a profile as well as a plan. Profiles are views from the side showing vertical details. They're sometimes called "section" or "elevation" drawings. They can convey information about sloping passageways, stairways, and other vertical relations more easily than a simple flat plan can.



Seti's Tomb (with profile)

Cave systems are a good example of maps that may need a profile, as their galleries may slope up or down and twist around and under one another. You can use other techniques to show vertical relationships if necessary, including shading or tags that indicate depth or slope.

If you wish to be really fancy, you can render floorplans in pseudo-3D, using isometric drawing techniques. There are some software packages that will render beautiful isometric floorplans for you if you have the time and money to invest in them. Such artistically rendered maps aren't necessary, though, unless you'll be publishing the results or simply derive pleasure from creating them. In most cases, your time will be better spent in detailing the adventure rather than the building it takes place in.

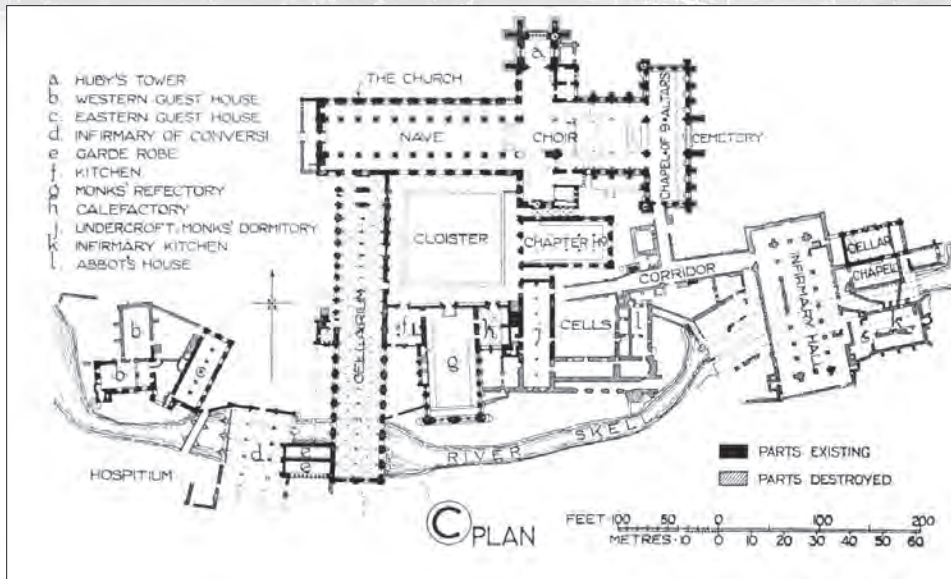


Wyandotte Cave System Map (without profile)

### Floorplan Scales and Keys

Most floorplan scales will be in meters (or yards) or feet. Drawing floorplans on graph paper is a simple way to indicate scale, with the side of one square being equal to 20', 10', or 5' (or even 1' if you need that level

# SECRETS FROM THE MASTER



Fountains Abbey with Scale (minimal detail)

of detail). The smaller the scale, the more details you can include.

Keys may consist of no more than the scale and numbered points if they're simple floorplans. More detailed plans may include icons for furnishings and architectural details (stairs, fireplaces, secret doors). Floorplans may also use numbering or lettering systems to label rooms and other areas, with a corresponding key detailing the area. Stereotypical dungeon maps come with detailed room keys that include descriptive text with information on inhabitants, furnishings, and, of course, treasure for each room.

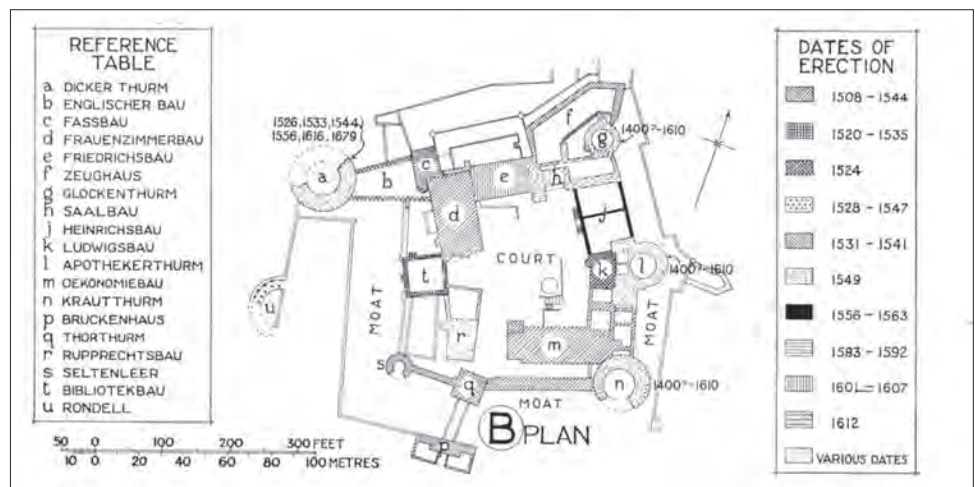
## Impossible Geography, or What Not to Include

You've probably seen it before in a game product or a fantasy novel: the Arabian-like desert next to the Norse-like northlands, mountains higher than Mount Everest and K2, lakes the size of seas, rivers that cut across mountain ridges or split and drain into two different

seas. "Impossible" geography, in other words, or at least geography that doesn't occur in "real life." Sometimes such impossible geography serves a purpose. More often, it's a result of an incomplete (or erroneous) understanding of real-world geography. Such mistakes, however innocent, can result in a serious disruption in the "willing suspension of disbelief" that's often crucial to a reader's or gamer's enjoyment of a story or game. The best way to avoid in-

roducing impossible geography into your game world is to base the geographical features in your made-up world on something similar on Earth (or other planets, to the limits of our understanding of non-Earth geography). This will make map-making easier, too, as there's a wealth of Earth-based maps you can use as templates and sources of inspiration for your own maps.

Here are some basic geographical facts that hold true for Earth (and should probably hold true for a world you create for gaming): Water covers 71% of the Earth's surface. Most of this is salt water (ocean). Lake Superior is the largest freshwater lake, covering 31,820 square miles (383 miles long). The Caspian Sea, although salty, is considered a lake by some because it's land-locked. It covers 152,239 square miles (745 miles



Heidelberg Castle with Keys

# LEARNING FROM THE MASTERS

long). Rivers and streams always flow downhill. Note that this isn't the same as always flowing south (a misconception some people pick up from the "north is up" orientation most western maps show). Also note that the gradient of the slope may be very slight. While a river may seem to flow over flat ground, it really is following a path from higher to lower elevations, however slight the slope. The Nile is the world's longest river, at 4,180 miles. The Amazon runs a close second (3,912 miles long) but dwarfs the Nile in terms of water moved (the Amazon River accounts for 20% of river discharge into oceans worldwide). Most rivers start out as "gullies" in mountains or hills. These tiny tributaries merge into ever-larger streams until they create a stream large enough to be called a river. Rivers rarely "split" in the downstream direction (one river becoming two or more). Exceptions include splitting around islands, splitting off in a "loop" (old "meandering" rivers on flat plains create oxbow loops which may get cut off to form an oxbow lake), and splitting into multiple paths in a delta just before emptying into a lake or sea. Deserts cover 30% of the Earth's land surface (the Sahara alone covers 3,500,000 square miles). Less than 20% of desert topography is sandy desert. All deserts are dry, but some are hot and some are cold. Even the hot ones are usually cold at night. Wind patterns and mountain ranges affect rainfall greatly, which in turn will affect vegetation types. If the prevailing winds are westerly (moving from west to east), rainfall will tend to be abundant on the windward slopes while the eastern slopes will suffer from a "rain shadow" where little precipitation falls. A little knowledge about physical geography and weather patterns can help you determine where to place your rain forests and your deserts.

## Go Ahead, Include Impossible Geography!

Including impossible geography in your world for a good reason is another matter. If you do some research into real-world geography you'll find that sometimes the impossible does happen. Rivers are a prime example of several "impossible" behaviors. Some rivers flow backward—usually coastal rivers that empty into a narrow inlet or bay that experiences impressive tidal flows, temporarily sending a surge of water upriver. Other rivers lie above the surrounding land on riverbeds raised by centuries of silt deposits. (The Huang He, or Yellow

River, in China is an example, with its riverbed rising as much as 70' above the surrounding land, due in part to centuries of levee controls.) Some rivers cut all the way through mountain range ridges, a feat that is normally impossible but can occur if the mountain range is thrust up after the river's course is set. The geography of Colorado's Gore Range shows several such phenomena, with canyons slicing through the range and streams starting down one slope, doubling back, and finally cutting through the ridge to drain down the opposite slope.

If magic, advanced technology, or divine powers are prevalent in your game world, you can use these to explain any impossible geography the player characters encounter. Such intentional deviations from the way the world works in real life can be good ways to make your world unique, as long as you don't overdo it. (Nothing takes wonder and awe out of a world faster than having nearly everything be wonderful or awesome in some way.) Starting with the premise of a non-Earth world (a flat world, for example) is another good reason to include geographical features that would be impossible on a spherical world governed by physics-as-we-know-it. Again, be careful not to overdo it, as a world that's too different from our own may be hard for players to "believe."

## Map Drawing Techniques

So now you have a good idea of what to put on your map. How do you actually draw it? You take a piece of paper and a pen and start drawing. I realize that may not be as simple as it sounds. A blank piece of paper can be a daunting obstacle. Where do you even start? What do you draw? Which symbols or types of lines do you use to represent what geographical features? What if you make a mistake?

It might help to realize that your first map is probably not going to be your final map. Think of it as a rough sketch, a first draft, a work-in-progress. Don't worry about the artistic merits of your map, nor the accuracy—at least not at first. The goal is to create a useful map (one that conveys information), not necessarily a masterpiece. At this stage, as long as you know what all those squiggles and dots and splotches mean, it doesn't really matter what the map looks like. Don't worry about mistakes, either. Some mistakes, like a



# SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

sudden unintended zag when you wanted to zig in a section of coastline, can result in inspiration. Why not put a hidden cove there? One that pirates use! Perhaps this area is famous for its jagged seacoast cliffs, with sea caves and dangerous rocky shores! In fact, a shaky hand can be a great asset when drawing coastlines and rivers. Real-world coastlines and waterways often have twisted, convoluted paths and shapes that won't translate to your made-up coastlines if you're trying too hard to be neat.

Drawing a map, especially a world map or regional map, can be a synergistic process. Start with some vague ideas, such as how many continents the world has, or that this region has an impressive mountain range and a famous river with a thriving seaport at its mouth. Let other ideas come to you as you outline the area and start to fill in details. Perhaps the thriving seaport is actually a "twin city," once two separate cities but now inseparably linked through commerce, ferries, and bridges. The river may have even divided two countries which have since been united, with the resulting unification of the twin cities. There's no "right" order to the elements to put on your map. Play around with map-making to find out what works best for you. It may be best to start with major geographic features (coastlines, mountain ranges, and major rivers for continents or regions; city walls and the outline of the castle complex for fantasy or medieval cities) and then move on to the minor features. Or start from the center and move outward. Or start from one edge or corner and move to the other. Putting bounds on the area you're working with may help. If you don't wish to use the full piece of paper, draw a frame or border. With continents, drawing the coastline first is a good start. For floorplans, the exterior walls should probably be the first element you define. You can leave parts of the map blank, as well. Blank areas (or areas labeled "Here Be Dragons" or "Terra Incognita" or "Unknown Lands" or what ever) can represent terrain about which the player characters know little or nothing. (Of course, any inhabitants of such "unknown territory" will be familiar with the area and what's there.) But you can leave spots blank if you simply haven't decided what you want there, as well. In this case, the fictional inhabitants of the surrounding areas will know what's there, but you don't have to—until it becomes important to the campaign or adventure you're running. Then

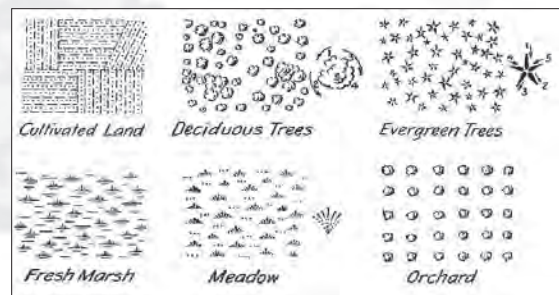
you can fill in the blank spots with whatever you decide has been there all along.

## Mapmaking Symbols and Conventions

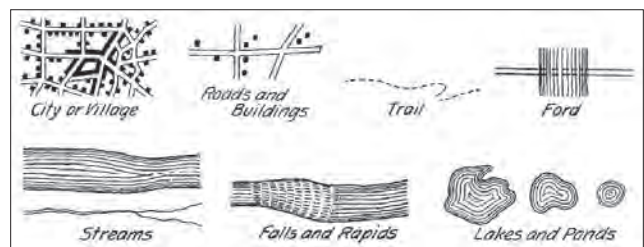
If you examine several maps, you'll see that there are many ways to represent geographical and architectural features. Symbols or icons are handy visual aids that say "there are mountains here" or "here's a temple." Shading, hatching, colors, and other techniques can indicate different terrain types, slopes, vegetation, and so on. The symbols and techniques you choose will determine the look and "feel" of the map you create. Antique maps used different techniques than did nineteenth-century maps, and modern maps have still another look. The United States Geological Survey (USGS, <http://www.usgs.gov>) is a great source of map symbols, especially those used for topographical maps.

## Sample USGS Topographical Symbols

There are various ways to indicate vegetation. One popular way is a "fill pattern." Such patterns are easy to apply in computer mapping and illustration software, although it can be difficult to set the pattern up to give the "hand-drawn" artistic look, especially around the edges of the area to be filled.



Sample Vegetation Patterns

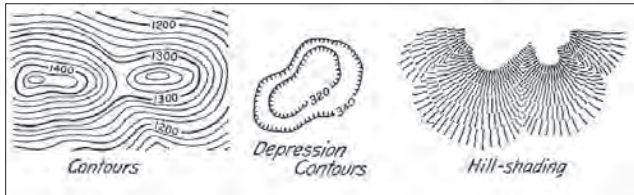


Sample Terrain Patterns and Techniques

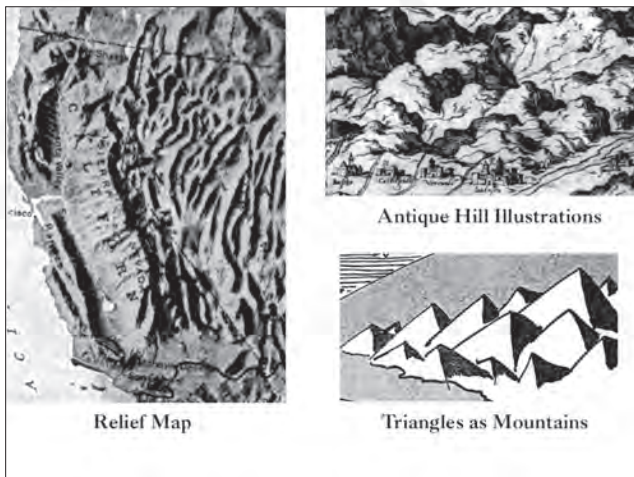
Hills and mountains are some of the most difficult terrain features to illustrate clearly and artistically. There

# TIPS FROM THE MASTERS

are several techniques you may use. One is to use contour lines to show the topographical elevations and land contours. Another is to use shading or hachures. Still another is to take the pictorial or icon approach. Mountain icons can be as simple as a triangle (shading can add the illusion of depth) or as detailed as illustrations of the actual mountains.



Contours and Hachures



Sample Hill and Mountain Icons

Color can also help indicate terrain, emphasize certain features, and generally improve the aesthetic appeal of your map.

## Mapmaking Materials

For your first few maps, I suggest you use blank paper and a pencil. If you make a “mistake,” just ignore it and continue drawing. You can always redraw the map later, with mistakes corrected and attention paid to artistry or accuracy. Doodles on napkins and scraps of paper are also good warming-up exercises. It’s hard to take a map too seriously if it’s on a napkin, but it’s easy to incorporate ideas and techniques you discover while doodling into later, more polished maps. If distance or direction (or both) is important to your map, graph paper or hex paper may help. Either decide on a scale

first (if you know how big you want everything to be) or draw your map and then assign the best scale to the squares or hexes. Graph paper is especially useful when drawing floorplans. Beware of 10' corridors and 20' x 20' rooms, though, and also beware of too much symmetry. With underground complexes, passageways and chambers should probably vary in width and not always be straight or square. (High-tech underground complexes are another matter, of course.) For dwellings, don’t forget the bathrooms (or *garderobes*)—assuming the culture and technology support bathrooms, that is.

Mechanical pencils are a good choice for drawing implements, as you don’t have to sharpen them and their erasers tend not to harden like some other pencil erasers do. Pencil work is great for first drafts, as you can erase mistakes and redraw areas. Once you have the basic map to your satisfaction, you can copy it over in pen and ink, or simply trace ink over the pencil markings. Technical pens (with very fine points) are great for detailed work, especially intricately squiggled coastlines. Almost any pen can be useful. Use ball-point, gel-tipped, or “ultra-fine” point pens for outlines (coastlines, walls, map symbols) and soft-tipped or “magic marker” pens for wider lines (rivers) or for coloring in areas. Colored pencils are great for softly coloring or shading areas and can add an artistic touch to pen-and-ink maps.

## Computer Tools for Mapping

Computer software is a great way to create polished-looking maps without eraser marks and ink smudges. You will need to invest some time in learning the software of your choice (in some cases a lot of time). Depending on the software, you may need to invest some money as well. Most software you can use for mapmaking comes in demonstration versions you can download and try out. Some software is actually freeware, requiring no monetary investment (assuming you already have a computer running the proper operating system for the software).

There are two basic types of software useful for mapmaking. Any drawing or painting program that you can draw images with can be used for making maps. Those with “layers” capabilities are especially useful if you wish to be able to print out different versions of

## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

each map showing specific details—a players' map and a GM's map, for example. Layers are also useful when drawing maps, as you can temporarily hide any layer (the tags layer, for example) that's distracting you or obscuring the portion of the map you're working on. In addition, there are several software packages that were specifically designed for mapmaking. These may be the "drawing" type, or they may use grids and icons for quick placement of map elements, or they may offer a combination of techniques. Some use sophisticated "fractal mapping" to create maps showing terrain, some in 3D perspective.

In choosing mapping software, the first thing to decide is what your basic needs are. Do you need something that lets you create usable maps quickly? Perhaps one of the inexpensive or free icon-based packages will suit your needs. Do you want to create nice-looking maps in color or black and white that are high enough quality for commercial publication? Take a look at *Campaign Cartographer* and *Fractal Mapper*, both of which have been used for mapmaking by various companies in the game industry. Do you want complete control over the way your map looks? Use one of the general purpose drawing or illustration packages (the more powerful/flexible the better). Keep in mind that the more powerful software tools that facilitate commercial-quality maps will tend to require more investment (both monetary and learning time). If you think computer-aided mapmaking is for you, check out the Web sites of the following programs. Download their demonstration versions and play around with them. Then pick one and start mapping!

### General-purpose Drawing and Illustration Applications (available for both Macintosh and Windows)

Adobe *Illustrator* and *Photoshop* (<http://www.adobe.com>): These are the programs I currently use for mapmaking. *Photoshop* is especially useful when adding "artistic" touches (making the rivers look hand-drawn rather than steady-width computer-generated lines) to *Illustrator* files. Recent versions of *Photoshop* have enough drawing capabilities (as well as image manipulation) and text handling features to make it possible to draw a good map solely in *Photoshop*.

*CADIntosh* ([http://www.graphicconverter.net/us\\_cadabout.html](http://www.graphicconverter.net/us_cadabout.html)): This shareware program for the Macintosh is designed to facilitate technical and architectural drawings.

*Canvas* (<http://www.deneba.com/products/canvas8/default2.html>): This was the first drawing software I owned, and it was wonderful for mapmaking. Adobe *Illustrator* overtook it in feature sets at one point (which is why I switched), although *Canvas* has since caught up again.

*CorelDraw* and *Bryce* (3D terrain generator) (<http://www.corel.com>): *CorelDraw* is one of the tried and true graphics packages, now up to Version 10. *Bryce* is a nifty 3D terrain generator (and a lot more!).

Macromedia *Freehand* (<http://www.macromedia.com/software/freehand/>): *Freehand* is another of the well known long-time drawing applications. I haven't tried it recently, but am intrigued by the supporting Web site, Freehand for Cartographers (<http://www.applemaps.co.uk/f4c/>).

*Real-DRAW Pro* (<http://www.mediachance.com/realdraw/index.html>): This inexpensive but comprehensive package includes vector drawing tools as well as 2D and 3D editing tools. A truly amazing program for its price (around \$50). Sorry, Windows only.

### Software Created for Gamers

*Adventure Writer* (<http://www.digital-alchemy.net/software/>): *Adventure Writer* is a commercial Windows-based gamemastering tool set. At its heart is the mapping software, with over 1,000 fantasy and science-fiction mapping icons. You can place hyperlinks on your maps, which will open linked text or image files automatically when you click on the map. Terrain packs include outdoor terrain, caverns and catacombs, castles, sci-fi interiors, and even equipment icons.

*AutoRealm* (<http://www.gryc.ws/autorealm.htm>): This Windows-based mapping software is freeware, released under the GNU Open Source Licensing agreement, which means that if you're a programmer you can modify the software to your hearts' content and can benefit from modifications other programmers have made. It has some outdoor terrain icons, and its interface allows you to draw fairly intricate floorplans.

*Campaign Cartographer* (<http://www.profantasy.com/>): *Campaign Cartographer* is a powerful CAD (computer-aided design) package spe-

cifically designed for creating maps for game campaigns. The full software suite includes modules for regional maps, dungeons, and cities, with extra symbol packs available. There are a *Character Artist* pack (computer-generated player character portraits) and a *Di-oramas* pack (for creating models of buildings you can print out, cut out, and paste up). There's also a *Fractal Terrains* world generator (particularly good for science-fiction campaigns). Sorry, Windows users only.

*Fractal Mapper* (<http://www.nbos.com/>): This is another full-featured commercial mapping package (for Windows) that includes support for all types of maps (continents, cities, dungeons, etc.). The *Fractal World Explorer*, a 3D terrain generator, comes free with *Fractal Mapper*. The support site includes additional map icons drawn from actual 14th- and 15th-century maps to help you give your map an antique flavor.

Irony Games' Web-based Mapping Tools (<http://www.irony.com/>): Irony Games offers several free Web-based tools for gamemasters, including some handy Java-based interactive map makers. Quick and easy to use, you can create regional terrain maps, encounter maps, and even 3D terrain (although not with the level of detail and quality the *Fractal World Explorer* and *Fractal Terrain* commercial packages offer). There are lots of pregenerated maps you can use as well. Requires a Java-enabled Web browser.

*Mapbuilder* (<http://hometown.aol.com/phdgamesinc/>): This square-/hex-based mapping program is available for DOS, Windows, and Macintosh. You can hyperlink any square or hex on the map to other files. There are Terrain Packs that provide graphics for regional maps as well as cities, dungeons, castles, spaceships, and the like. While PHD Games, Inc., the company that distributes *Mapbuilder*, is no longer particularly active, the software is still available. Their Web site is a bit outdated but the e-mail address ([phdgamesinc@aol.com](mailto:phdgamesinc@aol.com)) is correct.

## “Real” Mapping Tools

*MapRender 3D* (<http://www.maprender3d.com/index.htm>): This commercial software creates high-quality relief maps in 2D and 3D, using real-world DEM (Digital Elevation Model) database information. The package includes five databases covering various portions of Earth, plus many ready-made map projections. Additional DEM data sets are available online (through

various academic and scientific sites, as well as the USGS Web site at <http://www.usgs.gov/>) and can be imported if you wish to pay for different data. Windows only.

*Terrain Tools* (<http://www.softree.com/>): This freeware mapping software (for Windows) provides drafting tools and a set of line types and symbols for drawing maps. You can load bitmap images to use as background graphics or as a template for your drawing. You can also enter survey data and coordinate points directly if you wish. (It might be fun to play with fictional survey data, after learning what such data consists of, of course!) Commercial versions (including a 3D terrain version) provide additional drafting and rendering capabilities.

*WinKarst* Cave Mapping Software (<http://www.resurgentsoftware.com/WinKarst.html>): This heavy-duty cave-mapping software provides three-dimensional passage modeling from cave survey data. If you're a caver, you'll know what this means. You can also use your GPS system. If you don't have your own survey data (or don't know enough about cave surveying to create your own for an imaginary cave), you can download some sample survey data sets from <http://members.aol.com/caverdave/CaveSurveys.html> and elsewhere on the Internet. Other cave mapping software includes *CavePlot* for the Macintosh (<http://members.aol.com/caverdave/CPHome.html>).

## Using Maps in Your Game

Making maps for your roleplaying games will help you build and define your campaign world. Maps can help you keep track of what (and who) is where.

### Player Map Handouts

You can use maps as props for your players. Looking at a map of your world will help your players envision it as you do. Maps, especially treasure maps, can also provide clues or direction to the characters in an adventure. You may want to create separate maps for your players. These player maps may include only partial information, leaving off some details your master GM maps have. They can even include misinformation, either designed to reflect what the PCs believe is true or to mislead them (and the players). Witness antique maps, which often had the world “wrong,” or trea-

## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

sure maps like the one in the movie *Romancing the Stone*, where the map won't make sense unless you turn it around or fold it in a certain way. Clues and puzzles can be hidden in player map handouts, if you wish to invest the time required for designing and drawing such props.

### Player-created Maps

Just because you're the gamemaster doesn't mean you have to do all the work and make all the maps. If you have artistically inclined players, they may be glad to create nice-looking maps from the sketches and rough drafts you make. You can go further, though, and involve your players in the world-building process as well as the mapmaking process. If you have a lot of "Here Be Dragons" areas in your map, you may want to enlist your players' help in filling in the information there. This is especially useful if a player wishes to have a character that comes from an area of the world you haven't detailed yet. Encourage the player to create basic information about the country and culture the character comes from—with guidance from you, of course, as the player-created information needs to mesh well with your long-term plans for your campaign and its setting. Ask the player to create a basic map of the area. If you like the direction he's taking with "his" part of the world, let him get as detailed as he likes.

Getting your players' help when you design the campaign world (and the maps that go with it) can foster a real sense of "vested interest" on the part of the players. No longer will they be simple observers of your creation (through their characters' interactions with it). They'll have a hand in shaping the setting. Input from multiple people can help make a campaign world truly unique and vibrant. Each contributor will bring a slightly different knowledge base, skill set, and world view to the creation of the campaign world. Frequent consultations between you and your co-creators will help ensure that everyone's happy with the final shape the campaign world takes. You should maintain control over the final outcome, though. While world-building-by-committee can work, and work well, it works best if there's a single person who makes the final determination of what will be where and how the world will be.

### Campaign World Redesign

Some day, you may gaze at the map of your campaign world and think, "Ugh." This may happen when you're older and more experienced, and look back on your early attempts at mapmaking, either from an artistic standpoint or from a world design point of view. Perhaps your campaign world suited you just fine when you were into hack-and-slash dungeon crawls, but you and your players are now interested in more story-oriented roleplaying, and the campaign world map as it stands now doesn't do much to facilitate epic storytelling. Dissatisfaction with your map may also occur when you realize that the map of your world looks like countless other maps of fantasy worlds you've seen in books and other games. This latter occurrence is inevitable to some extent, as even the most unusual fantasy worlds bear some resemblance to Earth. Still, your campaign world may look uninspired to you when held up to countless other (often equally uninspired) world maps.

If the problem is one of artistic presentation, redrawing the map using different techniques or more attention paid to detail may result in a map you're happier with. If your displeasure is due to dissatisfaction with the world itself, more drastic approaches may be necessary. Look at your map critically and determine which parts of your campaign world you like and which you find dissatisfying. It may be possible to redraw the map, changing only those elements that you find dissatisfying (perhaps you have too few rivers, or not enough mountains, or realize you inadvertently included some "impossible geography"). Then let your players know of any changes they should be aware of and continue with your campaign as though the current configuration of the world is the way it always has been.

You may decide that the campaign and its world need a complete overhaul. Talk with your players before you do anything drastic. Perhaps it's the political and cultural aspects of the world you find dissatisfying rather than the physical geography. In this case, you can use the same map (minus any political/cultural information) and start a new campaign on the same world but at a different time. You may bring the same characters into the new setting (via time travel or magic) or start with new PCs. You could create an alternate timeline, or a parallel world in another dimension, and "fix" the

# ADVICE FROM THE MASTERS

problems you see with the campaign world that way. Perhaps an apocalypse is what you need, with the world being rebuilt in an image closer to what you currently want. Natural and high-tech disasters can even alter the physical geography if they're severe enough (global warming raising sea levels, massive earthquakes, terraforming, etc.). You can make the apocalypse and the subsequent rebuilding part of the ongoing campaign, or wrap up the current campaign before starting a new one in the overhauled world.

If the idea of massively overhauling the current campaign doesn't sit well with you (or your players), you may need to simply move on. Start an entirely new campaign, using the original maps and campaign world and all the work you put into them as a learning experience, a source of inspiration, and an example of what not to do when designing a campaign world.

## Campaign World-building, One Step at a Time

by James M. Ward

Copyright ©2002 by James M. Ward

### The Pitfalls of World-building

Roleplaying, as you've already found out since you are reading this, is a lot of fun. If a person comes to enjoy the experience she is almost always drawn to the idea of creating her own game and doing some GMing herself. The effort involved in creating your own fantasy or science fiction roleplaying world can be a great deal of fun as well as entertainment lasting for hundreds of hours. It is an easy process as evidenced by the millions of players who have done it in the last twenty-five years. As a player, designer, and GM since 1974, I've managed to make almost every mistake one can do in world-building and roleplaying, so I'd like to pass along some tips and errors I've made so that you at least find a new set of things to do wrong besides the ones I've done.

### Mistake #1: Telling Friends

You've decided to take the plunge and try some of your own GMing. You've played for a while and love the game and think you know just what needs to be done to make a fantastic new world. You tell your friends that you want them all to play in it and get them excited. Two weeks later they are all asking when they are going to play. You've started outlining the map to the world and the maps to the major cities and you have some great information written down about some of the races. You tell them it's going to happen soon. A month later, you have down the basic ideas you want to use and you've fleshed out a dungeon, but you still aren't quite ready. Your friends are all doubters now and don't think you'll ever get it done. They start griping at you. I'm sure you get the picture. It's a good idea to have done all the work necessary to make your world before you even tell your friends you want them to play.

### Mistake #2: Designer's Disease

When I was the head of the design department at TSR (and it was a great pleasure working with so many amazing designers and editors) I dealt with people who had something I called "Designer's Disease." They would work with a project, redoing it and adding to it long after it was already done and their deadlines had come up. If I had let them, they never would have stopped adding and polishing their projects. This is often the same problem facing beginning GMs. It's not necessary to delay refereeing your friends until you have every last room filled in in your dungeons and every last building mapped out in your cities. You can easily guide your players into sections you have finished.

### Mistake #3: Beginners Using Large Boxed Sets from Companies

The lure of buying a large boxed set and trying to use it in your game is a strong one. I certainly won't say that anyone shouldn't buy such boxes since I've sold thousands of them myself. The problem with using such things is their large size. Imagine yourself using a campaign set with five or six booklets and lots of maps. Since you didn't write the product you are continually reading pages and referring to sections in order to run the game. There is nothing worse than watching a GM spend several minutes checking her facts.

## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

Beginners are much better served writing their own adventures and buying adventure modules and campaign boxes to use for their good ideas. When you do it that way you know what your castles and cities are filled with and you won't have to read text that will begin to bore your players as they wait many times in an adventure for you to figure out what happens next.

**“Start by writing what you know and create some type of inn for your characters to stay in. The inn can easily be a copy of any hotel you have ever stayed in.”**

Most importantly, start small. Design an inn and fill it with NPCs. Some of the people are going to have problems your player characters need to solve. Give the inn a basement with some secrets as well as a person who comes bursting into the inn with a problem. Spend about five pages on the people and things of the inn written out in long hand and do a one-page map with all the rooms labeled.

#### **Mistake #4: Doing It All Yourself**

It's not necessary to write every idea yourself. The best designers take elements from everything they read and turn those elements into their own games. The seven labors of Hercules can easily be turned into seven adventure quests perfect for your players. If you are a fan of comics, as are many of the designers in the hobby industry, you can turn your favorite comic heroes and villains and their stories into interesting quests for your players. One can easily imagine Doctor Doom or Doc Oc ripping into your player characters with their own adventure agendas. There are a number of highly useful core rule products that are full of ideas for your game. There's no reason in the world to think up all your own monsters and magic items when others have taken the time to design them for you. It's your job to present the story and keep the fun action flowing.

### **Step One: Create Fun Adventures from a Simple Inn**

The first step to creating a huge, fun roleplaying campaign world is to not try to create a big new world. Start by writing what you know and create some type of inn for your characters to stay in. The inn can easily be a copy of any hotel you have ever stayed in. Another good trick in creating a game world is writing about what you know. Use your house and the buildings in your town and the city for the fantasy town your characters live in. Get a map of your hometown or city and you have a ready-made map for your fantasy world.

You are now ready for your first night of gaming. Your players roll up characters and they move into the inn and prepare their rooms for a long stay. They deal with the innkeeper and hear some interesting rumors. They deal with the stable hands and hear about some false rumors. They meet an old witch who tells their fortunes and gives them a glimpse of unusual troubles to come. They listen to a wondrous bard and learn the bard has his own problems.

#### **Part of Step One : Create a Very Simple Town**

Follow the James M. Ward approved “rule of one.” The rule of one states that the best created people, places, and things are unique and not repeated. This rule will serve you well in all of your roleplaying design work. In the town you create for your first players do one of everything.

*Streets:* There is one street going in every one of the compass point directions, like big spokes of a wheel.

*Evil Challenges:* There is one evil person in the town somewhere and he has one helper.

*Buildings:* There is one blacksmith stable, one general trading post, one temple, one wizard's tower, and one of anything else you want to put in your town/village.

*Adventure:* The players as they enjoy your game are going to give you ideas for adventures. You need to have in mind a very simple adventure to get them started. The adventure should be focused on one thing and it should make the players feel good when they solve it.

# ADVENTURES FROM THE MASTERS

## Another part of Step One: Creating Nonplayer Characters

A great deal of fun can be had creating nonplayer characters for your players to run into and learn from. To begin with create characters from people that you have experienced in your real life. If you know a noisy neighbor or a nasty teacher they will make great characters in your campaign world. You must also make the “recurring bad guy.” This character will be one of the most memorable roleplaying experiences you and your players will ever have. This character should just start out as a mean person that your player characters meet. Through the course of the first adventure this character keeps appearing and causing trouble. Eventually the player characters will kill him and then the fun really starts. The character keeps coming back as an undead character; growing more and more powerful as time goes by. At first the “recurring bad guy” is just a nuisance and then turns into a real menace, until finally he becomes a very powerful evil that must be finally put to rest. Your players will at first be amazed and then begin looking for this character everywhere as the game goes on. It’s a concept that can be repeated

over and over with great success.

Here is a quick example. Thomas the blacksmith is a nasty character who doesn’t like his work or his village. He charges too much but is the only game in town so he gets his prices. When the players go to him he’s nasty and asks a lot of questions. Thomas decides to follow the party around the town and constantly pokes into their business. He even goes so far as to follow them out of town and into the various adventures they have. After trying to do several snatch and grabs he attacks the party at their weakest moment. He’s not a fighter and doesn’t do combat well, as he’s just a thug. He should be killed. Then some magical force, probably some type of evil prankster god, turns him into a zombie and he continues his ways. He is killed several times and maybe even burned to ashes by the clever players, but the prankster god isn’t tired of him yet and keeps animating him, making him look worse and worse. Finally there is so little of him left, the prankster god turns him into a more powerful undead type, a vampire or ghost, and he continues his vengeance against the characters. You can see where this leads as

the characters think they have finally killed Thomas, but death is only the beginning for this character.



## Step Two: The fun of Creating Your First Dungeon

Dungeon creation is amazing amounts of fun; when your players are scratching their heads trying to solve one of the problems in the dungeon it’s even more fun. There are lots of mistakes that can be made in doing a dungeon, and I’d like to highlight my first ones so that you don’t do them.

### Part of Step Two: Filling Every Chamber of Your 5,000-chamber Dungeon

The rule of one works great here. Don’t fill your first dungeon with hundreds of round and triangle-shaped chambers. Don’t do lots of chambers at all. Imagine yourself having to



# SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

dig each and every one of those chambers and you'll realize that a smaller place is a better idea. Think of your dungeon as a living, breathing thing. There was a reason it was built in the first place and you should keep that reason in mind as you draw your levels. Let us imagine a tribe of orcs moved into the area 100 years ago and built a cozy home/lair for themselves. What would orcs need in their dungeon/den? They would need sleeping chambers, a chamber to cook or prepare food, some place to keep their treasure, some type of large meeting room, some place to keep prisoners, some place to blacksmith their equipment and weapons, several large storage caves, and some place special for their leader to live. While they were making this ideal cave complex, let's further imagine they ran across a large cave pool, a deep underground crevasse, and maybe an ancient dwarven mine with five or so tunnels in the mine. Now you have the perfect dungeon to show your characters. They can invade it because the orcs are causing all sorts of problems with the local townspeople. Months later after they have emptied out that dungeon, fill it up with undead that have repopulated the dungeon and they can have fun fighting through it all over again.

## Another Part of Step Two: Your Dungeons Have to Be Fun and Approachable

Here are ten quick don'ts that you should seriously consider when putting together your dungeon:

1. Don't fill your dungeon with deadly traps, as dead characters don't smile a lot during adventures.
2. Don't fill your dungeon with dragons, as an eaten character doesn't seem to like playing much any more.
3. Don't be stingy with treasures, as big payoffs can make for big fun and you can worry about the consequences of too much treasure later.
4. Don't forget theming your dungeon so that it has a reason for existing.
5. Don't forget placing mysterious puzzles in your dungeon that can be figured out by your players, as only killing twenty monsters and taking twenty treasures can quickly get boring.
6. Don't forget there are consequences for your player character actions, like when they beat up a troll there are always larger brother trolls who want to find who

beat up their little brother.

7. Don't forget that big, difficult-to-kill monsters really need big treasures and little, easy-to-kill monsters need little or no treasure.
8. Don't forget to write in smells and noises into your dungeon.
9. Don't forget your players need to have as much fun as you are having.
10. Finally, don't forget that players always go left when you want them to go right, so give them a good reason to go right or stop complaining.

## Step Three: The Fun in Making Your First Small Kingdom

You need to map out a small kingdom for your player characters to live and adventure through. Pick a land type and fill the center of a piece of paper with a rough drawn circle. Think of forest or mountains or swamps or deserts and that's what fills the main part of your land. Then rough out two large rivers that go from one end of your map to another. Place your capital city at the center of the map and draw two big roads leading from your city in two different directions. Then place a town at one end of a road and another town at the other end. Sprinkle some little villages and single inns here and there and make dirt roads leading from them to the larger two roads. Place some hills with underground dungeons here and there. Now you have your world and it's a place that your players may never explore completely in thousands of fun gaming nights.

## Part of Step Three: You Have to Create Your Capital

Creating your capital can be a great deal of fun. Don't overdo the details and keep in mind the rule of one, but now you have to apply that rule to sections of a city. At this point it wouldn't hurt to do a little research on medieval cities and how they were built. You should be able to have just as many adventures in your capital as all the dungeons of the area combined. It's also a good idea to take a modern-day map like a map of Chicago or Milwaukee and use that as your model for what your campaign city looks like.

## Another Part of Step Three: You Have to Make an Outdoor Environment

Part of your land should be populated with interesting creatures that won't instantly eat your player characters. Just paging through your books of monsters will give you some great ideas for large clusters of monsters. It's also a lot of fun to make unusual land features. It's possible to make your forests filled with white-leafed trees. Maybe your mountains are filled with pixies and tiny caves filled with interesting crystals. In other words, your lands should be interesting to explore.

## The Last Part of Step Three: Creating Adventures

You've done all the steps and created a village, lots of NPCs, and a small kingdom. Your players are having fun and you want to make sure they have more fun. Try to mix monster-slaying and treasure-gathering with quests that will turn your player characters into public heroes. Finally, each of your player characters should be encouraged to build his own castle and become a lord in the kingdom. This takes a lot of time, gold, and planning. From the very first day of their adventuring they can have the castle creation goal and you can have the fun of helping them achieve that goal.

# Gamemaster's Flowchart 101

(AKA "old writer's trick for keeping track of a story's characters")

by Mark Simmons

Copyright ©2002 by Mark Simmons

1. Sit down somewhere quiet with a cup of tea (or your drink of choice), the scenario, and a pen and some scrap paper.
2. Read scenario. Then make more tea ....
3. Read it again (!), but this time imagine it's a movie. As you read, (a) write down a "cast list" of NPCs, making sure that you include *everybody*, the page number their stats appear on, etc.; and (b) write a list of "locations" where any "action" is likely to take place.

4. Arrange the NPCs in "billing order," *i.e.*, put the main villains at the top and minor ones at the bottom. Extras can go even further down the list. Dead easy.

5. Arrange the locations in the order that the players might "uncover" them, leaving space between each entry. Not so easy, as some "locations" might be reached by different routes.

6. Decide who the important NPCs are (use the list!). Write them down on a big piece of paper. Link them together with arrows and lines as in a computer flowchart, and write next to the lines "why they know each other." Don't worry if it's messy; all that matters is that it works for you. Add further NPCs from the list until you have everybody on the paper.

7. By now you'll have a good idea of how the characters fit together. Note any inconsistencies to solve for yourself later.

8. Take the locations list and do the same, linking them together with a logical flow of arrows.

9. Finally, write the names of any main NPCs tied to locations down next to their locations on the location flowchart.

10. Remember to keep it simple.

*Et voilà!* Players may curse your convoluted plots, but you should always be able to keep track of who and where everything is ....

A few additional comments:

Location flowcharts work best with games like *Call of Cthulhu*, where there are definable "locations" and clues linking each together, but can still be useful in other games also. They should be kept abstract, *e.g.*, "the graveyard," "the library," etc., rather than down to "room by room" (unless, say, a haunted house is the ONLY location). Why? Well, in the average scenario, the author has already broken down the adventure location by location for you, so next to each box on the chart you can put "see page XX" as a memory aid. Linking an event timeline (see "Designing an Adventure," above) to the location chart is a good idea, as it will tell you about anything that might or might not be found at a location after a certain time.

Keep in mind that not every NPC is linked to every other one, and not every location is linked together.

On the NPC list, you can also write notes about how the NPCs know/encounter/use/are useful to the PCs. One has info about local black market wares, one runs the local chop shop, one is the desk sergeant at the lo-

## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

cal precinct, etc. An example might be, “Joe Bloggs, cultist leader, aged 45, cowardly, has nasal voice, looks like actor Peter Lorre, knows about the conspiracy, stats on page 40.” Sometimes I add skills, hit points, and other “quick reference data” like weapons and favorite spells.

Saying to keep it simple may seem a bit contradictory, since I’ve told you to draw up two big, involved charts. It’s very easy to overcomplicate flowcharts (or plans of action, or instructions for that matter). The aim is to have something that is practical and helps you GM; therefore, a reminder to keep it as simple as possible can help stop you going overboard.

Finally (education theory bit), the process of sitting down, reading the scenario, and making flowcharts, timelines, etc. to complement the published material *is itself* part of the point of this exercise. It’s a “didactic” learning tool (learning by doing) that also structures information, like sitting down to write a list of “pros and cons” to help you decide on the best solution to a tricky problem.

This method won’t work for everyone. However, even if you find that you can’t write a flowchart for a scenario, the act of sitting down and reading the scenario through always helps.

## Character Creation

by Ross Winn

Copyright ©2002 by Ross Winn

A gamemaster requires memorable characters in order to realize her goal of running a memorable campaign. To many players and gamemasters, creating a character is something approached in a half-hearted or haphazard fashion, something to be done in a hurry, sometimes only a few minutes before the game starts. While possible, this is far from an ideal situation. So what is an ideal situation, and what is an ideal character? The answers depend on the game, the gamemaster, and the players involved, but there are some basic ideas that make the process better.

In many games the players “roll up” their characters. The paradigm of a character with a random set of statistics modified by options chosen from a predetermined list is nearly universal in RPG’s. Many players and GMs felt that this did not allow them to tell stories

that they were interested in being a part of. Eventually, some of those people wrote and published games that allowed characters to be created to fit an idea or concept. Some games used classes, others used templates, and a few abandoned all structure to allow the players to create any type of characters they wanted.

At first character creation was accomplished through random die rolls for each statistic. Some games and GMs then allowed players to modify how they rolled up their characters. A player could trade statistic points in some way, or roll the numbers randomly and assign them to the statistics appropriate for the player’s basic concept. This system can work very well for games that do not have other types of allocation. A GM may also allow players to replace below-average rolls in certain stats, usually determined by class or race.

Hundreds of games have now attempted to reinvent the wheel and redefine how players will create their characters. Yet few of these games seem to have realized that the character is probably the single most important component of a game. Even fewer have realized that the character must start with an idea. This idea is referred to as the character concept.

As gamemasters we build the idea of a campaign in our heads, much the same way as a player builds his idea of a character. These ideas, the gamemaster’s and the player’s, feed off of each other. It is important that the gamemaster understands what the players want, and the players understand what the gamemaster wants. In an ideal situation the gamemaster and the players sit down together and hammer out the basics of each character.

The most basic part of creating a character is the sense of the character’s self. What gives the character his idea of identity? This can easily come from within the player’s own personality. In acting many professionals approach the different characters they play from their own personalities. Some element of the character they are portraying is exactly like, or exactly the opposite of, the actor’s self. Though this can be a small part of the character, the first few ideas are commonly the most central, the core persona.

If the player is a scientist possibly the character is too. If the player is an easily excitable person, maybe the character is as well. These core ideas, while not always important in play, give the player a center to work with in developing the character. This substance

## TIPS FROM THE MASTERS

makes the character more believable and more entertaining for all involved. While these initial inspirations usually come from the player's own personality, they are not the only possibilities. The game and the gamemaster can also lend a hand.

The second major inspiration for the character is the game and the world, or setting, of the campaign. Just as there is something about the world that intrigues the gamemaster, there should be things about that world that intrigue the player as well. Does the idea of rebelling against a corrupt government inspire him? Does he dream of being a simple hero of a simpler time? Many games postulate a past or a future where great things are possible. They commonly introduce characters that are powerful and driven to do great things. The characters should be capable of anything that the people presented in the game can do. This is in many cases why the players choose a specific game, and it is almost always why a player chooses a specific type of character.

The third most common source of inspiration is the gamemaster. Usually by the time the characters come into the picture the gamemaster has a set of ideas and expectations for the party. If she knows her players well she may have plot ideas and story elements that will fit the players' personalities. Does one of the characters need to have a certain skill? If the GM is good at creating intriguing planets or interesting alien races then a player's specialization in planetology or xenomedicine may be well rewarded. Does one of the characters need to be tied to an NPC? If the character is an experienced thief there is almost always an existing relationship with the local constabulary (sometimes an adversarial one, at other times a relationship of mutual respect). Does a character need to be cursed? In a world rich with magic a curse can be the impetus for a group of stalwart friends to complete a quest and free a comrade from the clutches of evil. These opportunities can lead to a satisfying roleplaying experience and can also allow a gamemaster to insert story elements and goals important to the group as well as a specific character.

As each player develops his character it is important that no single player feel slighted or burdened by the gamemaster. If the GM gives one player a hook, then she should give each of the other players a hook for their characters as well. This should not be construed to mean the characters need to be the same. Conversely,

each player should be an individual and generally have different goals. These goals are often complementary, but usually different.

The idea of complementary characters extends past the basics of character concepts. Characters must also share other basic features. This usually leads back to the players. If the gamemaster is interested in running a group of knights and wizards on a campaign against an evil empire, then playing an evil assassin is probably not a good idea. Players who do not wish to work with the other players or who are interested only in what mayhem they can cause may not have a place in the campaign.

However, the gamemaster should not designate too many features of the characters. Having part of the character's background or skills dedicated to mutual goals is important to party goals, but if the players have little or none of their own ideas invested in their characters the game will be flat. Ample elements to be explored on the way toward a common goal will lead to a richer gaming experience.

All of this also begs another question. Are the players and the gamemaster interested in the same type of game? Not all of the players need to be wildly excited about the different ideas the gamemaster has, but if they are not even mildly interested in them then maybe they are a poor fit. This should not be considered a failure on either the player's or the gamemaster's part. It may just be that both need to compromise and add or delete certain elements to the game. It is better that the campaign interests both the players and the gamemaster equally, even if it is not the first choice for both.

Many players will need only a handful of features to define their characters and their place in the world. Other players will need many more features to define their characters and even then feel somewhat incomplete.

Characters that are very simple or very complex can be boring or too complicated at the beginning of a campaign. Not all the features of a character have to be delineated or even considered before play begins. As play progresses it is a common thing for the gamemaster to take the players aside separately and ask what is going well and what is not for their characters. Features that were interesting at first may become hackneyed or burdensome. Other features may be resolved in the course of the campaign. In this process, adding features or

## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

making previously trivial features a larger part of the character is a very natural part of the process. It is important that the gamemaster have input at all stages of the process, but it should not be as important as the player's ideas.

A crucial part of the character design process is that it not be a finite process. Adding to a character should be continued throughout the campaign. There is a great deal of satisfaction in discovering and developing individual features to the character and to the campaign.

As the player defines features of his character it is important to note that there are two basic types of character features, the visible and the invisible. Visible features are just that—being tall, being wheelchair-bound. Other features are invisible or inobvious and are only discerned by the other characters in intimate or close situations—a painful experience with a lost love that then skews a character's view of the opposite sex for the rest of his life; a family curse that, while true or not, the character feels is responsible for his varied misfortunes. A third type of character feature may have a visible sign from an invisible source—a character's slumped shoulders from carrying the weight of the world on his proverbial back; the haunted look of a man who has been hunted for much of his life.

As mentioned earlier, character creation is usually done by randomly generating statistics and choosing from a certain set of options. Statistics commonly measure physical strength, force of will, constitution, good looks, intelligence, and possibly magical abilities or psionics. Statistics may seem to get in the way of the concept, or the execution of the concept, for that character. This can seem frustrating from the player's point of view. However, if approached discreetly by the gamemaster and with an open mind by the player, it can add some interesting opportunities for the character. The gradual attainment of becoming the fastest gun in the West or the greatest hero of the age can be even more rewarding than the play once the character reaches his goal. This again reinforces the fact that not all character features need be settled before play begins.

Was Batman always quite so cool and collected? Was the Wizard always the most powerful man in Oz? Many

stories have been told of great men and women on their way to being great. Overcoming a limited education or other difficulty can make us great as people, and it can make our characters great heroes as well. In many ways a character's weaknesses are more important than his strengths. Would Superman be as interesting if there were no kryptonite? Accepting limitations and even exploiting them for the benefit of a character can be a player's triumph.

Not all strengths and weaknesses need be major points of a character. When these less important characteristics are used in the game they are commonly referred to as quirks. Quirks are the little things that make each character an individual. Mild claustrophobia, a dislike of red wine, and winking at waitresses are all traits that make our characters interesting. Quirks are important because to many of us the small things are as important as the big things.

Another important point is that the character should change and develop throughout the campaign. New features can be added and other features can become less noticeable as the character and the campaign progress. Some games have attempted to codify these changes. Rules for practicing existing skills and learning new ones are common. There is more to the character changing than the character sheet, however. The character sheet can be seen as a snapshot. A snapshot of the character at a particular time is not a complete model of the character. The character sheet should change to reflect the growth in the character throughout the campaign.

Many of the character's changes and development over time will have obvious effects. In Atlas Games' *Over the Edge*, each of the character's major attributes has a visible sign in the physicality of the character. This is especially important for the character's disadvantages or flaws. A person on the edge of destitution may have clean clothes, but they may be worn and much mended. A character with a military past may wear clothes or accessories in a certain way. In a postholocaust game someone may think that a character is an army deserter because of the way he wears an oxygen bottle.

Other changes in a character may be much less ob-

**“...the character should change and develop throughout the campaign.”**

# ADVENTURES FROM THE MASTERS

vious, or even invisible. A man hunted for most of his life may have a hunted look about him even after his enemies are defeated and he walks free. Scars on the character's body may fade or even be removed, but some changes will have lasting effects on the character's persona.

Certain critical events will help define the character's features and development. In superhero RPG's the first of these critical events is commonly referred to as the character's origin. How did the PC's powers first manifest? Where was the PC when this happened? Were there other PCs or NPCs involved? Other critical events could be a character's first major defeat, the first meeting of the team, or the team's first decisive victory. As critical events for each character occur and are resolved, in most cases with the help of the rest of the group, it will help cement the PCs' relationships as a team.

Some players tend to play very minor variations of the same characters time and again. This is usually due to a comfort factor. RPG's are in many ways an extension of the make-believe games we played as children. Many of these games use icons or stereotypes, like Cops and Robbers or Cowboys and Indians. We use these stereotypes to create characters that we feel comfortable with and use those characters to learn the ins and outs of RPG's. While this type of modeling is very useful in learning to roleplay, failure to broaden one's skills and horizons will quickly lead to repetitive play. Gamemasters should coach the players that while common features, like those of the player's own personality, are fine, each new character is an opportunity to explore new ideas and new areas of interest.

Sometimes a player will come into conflict with the other players and the gamemaster. A player can become so conscious of his own character's goals and agendas that he discounts those of the other players and the gamemaster. Moderation in the group and teamwork are an important part of the social experience of RPG's. GMs can avoid some of these conflicts by asking the player about his PC's motivations. Players who keep in mind their PCs' basic motivations seem to have less of a tendency to focus solely on their own characters. Three motivations address many of the basic questions of character: personal motivation, team motivation, and heroic motivation.

Personal motivation is the most basic core of the character. Why is he here? Why does he strive to suc-

ceed? Why does he refuse to quit? What is he trying to accomplish? The character's *raison d'être* can be anything from avenging his family's honor to wanting to accumulate vast amounts of treasure.

Why does the PC choose not to go it alone? There are hundreds of reasons for the character to be part of a team. As the GM it is important to ask your players to choose one. Does the PC doubt his ability to go it alone? Does he have a weakness that being a part of a team helps to counteract? Is he fulfilling a debt of honor to another of the team members or to a patron? Each character having a strong team motivation can prevent intrateam conflict and contribute to party unity and party identity.

Many RPG's are heroic in scope or view. The PCs' heroic motivation gives them a reason to fight for what they believe is right. Even in games where the PCs are antiheroes there is a why to that as well. Is the PC righting a past wrong? Does the character feel an obligation to an ideal? Does he simply love justice or have a deep-seated feeling of right and wrong?

As players combine ideas of concept, inspiration, motivation, change, and growth they create characters that are memorable in their own right. With additional attention to group ideas and the GM, the campaign can be a memorable one for all involved.

## Harems and Harpies: Women at the Gaming Table

by Hilary Doda

Copyright ©2002 by Hilary Doda

From early childhood on, toy and game manufacturers seem bound and determined to keep girls and boys split as far apart as possible, from the endless rows of pink-upon-pink dolls and accessories to the dark plastic rank-and-file armies and imitation weaponry. That gender gap, whether it's a natural or manufactured phenomenon, seems always to have existed. Its impact is felt in almost every aspect of life, including the hobby of gaming, stereotypically seen as solely the territory of lonely teenage boys. According to figures released

# SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

by Wizards of the Coast in the summer of 2000, about 80% of gamers in North America were male and a mere 20% were female. When you look at that ratio, suddenly all those complaints about the single geek life swim into perspective! Assuming that there is nothing about gaming that is an inherent turn-off for women—we do have about 1 in 5, after all—how do we get more women to the gaming table? Perhaps more importantly, how do we keep them there once they’ve tried the hobby out?

There are as many factors keeping people away from gaming as there are people, really, but there are a few generalizations that seem safe to make. While every woman is, of course, her own person, there are some factors that affect women more strongly than men when it comes to how they choose to spend their leisure time. There is a strong perception of gaming as a male domain, akin to football for the geek set. This idea of gaming as a “guy thing” can be strongly reinforced by the fact that most folks get into gaming in those turbulent high-school years, a time when social niceties between the sexes can get sorely befuddled. High-school cliqueishness and social structure can bring gamers, specifically male gamers, to band together for sheer survival’s sake. This mindset can be seen to extend throughout the hobby as a whole, even as gamers age.

More strikingly, there are a number of factors not based on stereotype as much, but rather on structures buried deeply within various societies. I’ll focus on Western society here, as gaming tends to be much more popular here than elsewhere. Western women are, for the most part, trained to be paranoid about violence

and sexual assault, barraged with figures and facts from elementary school onward. Self-defense classes and mace keychains aside, there are few women or girls who would feel comfortable sitting in a stranger’s house surrounded by unknown men. If the 80/20 figure is accurate, not every gaming group will already have a woman involved, something that would make that group a perceptually safe place. On a slightly less somber note is the time factor. Despite mass entry into the work force, adult women still spend more time than men engaged in domestic duties, especially in a household with babies and/or young children. While everyone’s time for gaming decreases as people get older and take on more responsibilities, women are faced with a burden that increases more rapidly, especially since many activities related to pregnancy and breastfeeding can’t be shared with even the most equal of life partners.

Now that we’ve defined some of the problems, what can we do about them? Assuming that getting more women into gaming is a good thing (more gamers in general means more people to play with, not to mention more money in the industry, which means more cool games to play, and so on), what do we do to make sure that we’re not perpetuating an environment or attitude that pushes them away? Getting a friend to swing by and check out a game session is one thing; managing to convince her that sitting around a table chucking dice at each other can be a lot of fun is something else entirely!

First and foremost, how do we get more women to take that first step and try a game or two? We’ve all tried to introduce partners and friends into the hobby.



# WOMEN AND GAMING

Some have stayed, while others hightailed it out of the game (and maybe out of our lives) as quickly as their legs could carry them. Obviously, just plunking them down in front of a Heaping Pile o' Dice (™) and a character sheet or two isn't going to cut it for every woman out there, so what other strategies can we try?

The safety factor is a big one at the beginning, especially if a woman doesn't know anyone already involved in gaming. Many of us were brought in by friends and family, giving us an easy entrance. For someone just picking up the hobby, however, playing with strangers or folks you barely know—especially without another woman in the group—can be an uneasy prospect. Rather than inviting a new friend or acquaintance to join the group at a member's home, an unknown place with potentially limited escape routes, plan a session in your Friendly Local Game Store or another well lit, relatively populated area. Gaming conventions are great for that first taste, as any personal risk is vastly alleviated by the sheer number of people around. It's a depressing thought to have to consider, sure, but gaming is, after all, a social activity, and making all the players comfortable should be a priority for all of us.

Women tend to feel safer in groups. If you don't already have a female player in your group, or you're looking at forming a new group entirely, invite two women in each other's presence, or ask your prospective new player to bring along a friend. This tactic has a double blessing built right in—it not only reduces the chance that she'll think you're trying to pick her up, but it provides you with an opportunity to get more than one new gamer into your group.

For those blessed with a place to host games, be it a store, large apartment, or parent's basement, your first step is to ensure that it's not a disaster area. The fear response can be triggered by dark or cramped spaces, and discomfort is not the aim if you're angling to get someone to come back on any kind of regular basis.

Now you have your players and your space and have settled in. What do you do about the game itself? This is just common sense, really—treat female newcomers exactly the same as you would male ones. Explain the rules and the system if she hasn't read the material yet. Don't patronize her or dumb things down if she's older than twelve; the stereotype may tell us that the average woman may enjoy math less than the average man, but it's just a stereotype. Don't focus the session too tightly, either. Some women like soap-opera-style romance plotlines or heavy-duty politicking, but others enjoy brutal combat and brain-twisting problem-solving.

Girls are steered toward social games and cooperative play at an early age, while boys are steered toward competition and aggression to build relationships with one another. As an extension of this combination of attitudes, social games which involve more character interaction tend to be more popular with women. The recent surge in popularity of live-action games has opened up a new area of the hobby to tabletop gamers, and live-action games draw women much more effectively than straight wargames, probably due to the increased emphasis on interaction over demolition. If she has never gamed before she may not know what she likes, or even what the possibilities are. Keep the introductory session moving and give it a good mix of the various elements that go into games. Afterward, your players can tell you what they enjoyed the most, and that can show you in which direction to point the next game. Don't assume that your players will love the same things that you love about gaming!

You know all those jokes about unwashed gamers? Don't be one. Bathe. Women have more sensitive senses of smell than men and can pick up the stench of both





# SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

desperation and unwashed socks half a mile away. Just as you (we hope) tidy up the gaming area before your group comes over, you should give yourself a once-over too. I'm serious; don't be That Guy.

All right! You've met a couple of gamer girls, you've played with them a few times, and they seem to be into the game. Now, how do you keep them at the table for good? It's a sad truth of the hobby that almost every game group splits up and reforms over the years, usually adding new people as old ones drift away, sometimes from gaming entirely. Modern lives being what they are, it's often unavoidable, as folks get job transfers, graduate, find themselves with less free time, or just generally move on. There are a few reasons why women in particular may stop gaming, or at least why they stop gaming with your group (other than the standard personality conflicts which can afflict any social group). We can try to find some solutions to keep them coming around.

The game itself can often be an issue, as it can with guys. Sometimes you're going to run something that not everyone enjoys, and that's perfectly fine. Players, especially in large and diverse groups, may show up for one game or system and take a pass on another that meets on a bad night or isn't quite their style. This can make for easier planning, giving the GM a smaller group of PCs to worry about than might otherwise be the case. Every so often, though, something may crop up that has nothing to do with the system or game itself and everything to do with the way it's been run or played. Rampant sexism in-game as well as out, time pressures, and the constant work required at home can all hamper a woman's desire or ability to keep gaming. If this seems to be happening to someone in your group, it may be

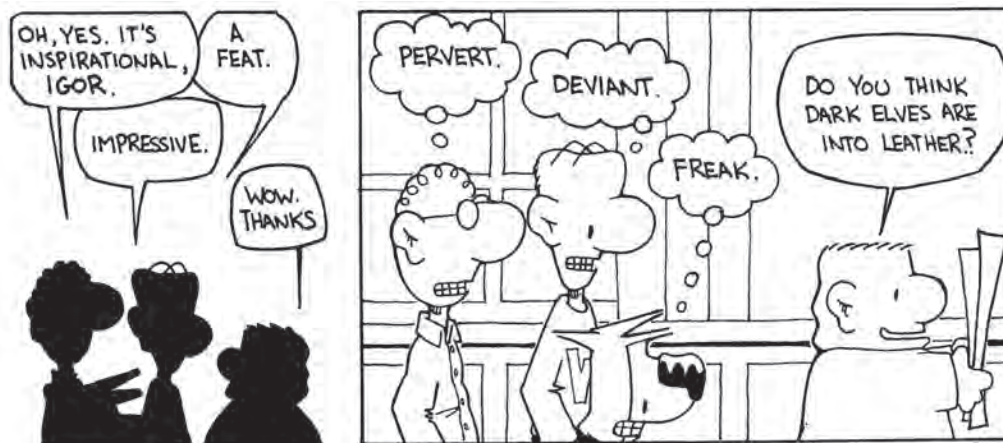
time to stop and take a look at your arrangements.

Be aware of sexual equity in your game. Yes, I know—that's a hot-button phrase. By "equity" I don't just mean the number of female vs. male NPCs; the way you treat female and male PCs and NPCs can have a dramatic impact on comfort levels and play styles for your players. Whether you run a historical epic or a space shoot-'em-up, how you deal with female characters reflects directly on how you are perceived to think about women in general. No, that's not fair, but it's a conclusion that many folks will make, especially if a pattern becomes visible. Despite the fact that games are intended to be purely fictional, it's the rare GM who can completely divorce himself from his characters. Unfortunately, sometimes attitudes portrayed by the NPCs can be projected back onto the person uttering those attitudes, even though they may be entirely opposite to the GM's normal beliefs.

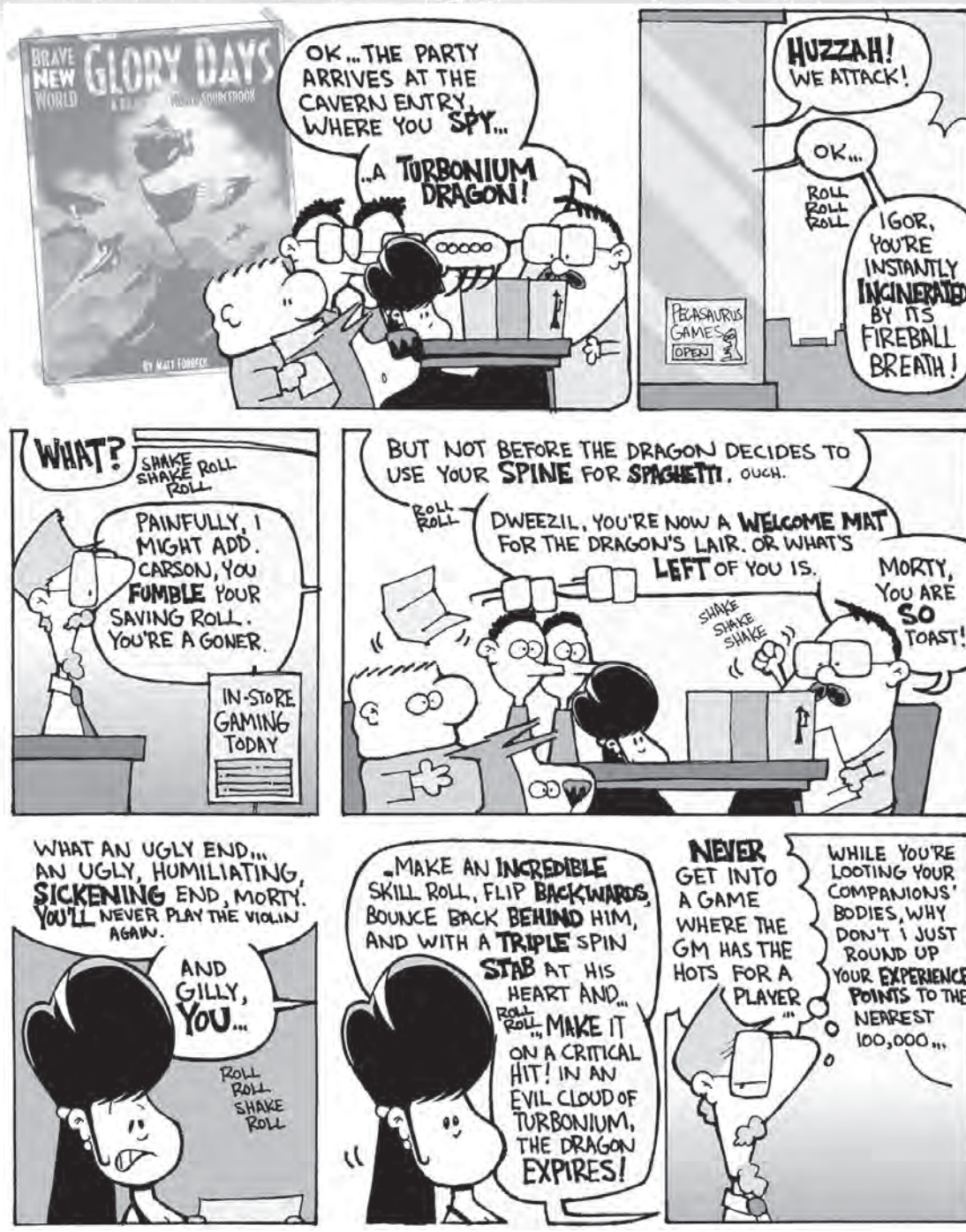
On the other hand, in a game set in a world or situation that is deliberately sexist, sometimes equity can't and shouldn't be forced. It would be terribly strange to have female gladiators in a game based in historic Rome, and downright odd to have male political leaders in a world run entirely by women. In cases of this nature, just be sure that everyone knows what the game will be like before it starts. Don't wait until the first session to inform the players that they're all starting as captive, nymphomaniac Orion slave girls, or someone might be very unpleasantly surprised (and it won't be just the women).

Pay attention to your female players' likes and dislikes and treat them as you would any other players. Don't dismiss their suggestions just because of who the ideas come from or pay female players too much

attention for the same reason. Despite some biological differences, deep down, we're all the same. Even an inexperienced player can come up with brilliant plans, and no one *ever* likes to be made to feel stupid or unwanted. Remember, the idea is to keep



SECRETS FROM THE MASTERS



new players—male and female alike—playing and enjoying your game. (Of course, if you're *trying* to get rid of certain players for any reason, reversing any and/or all of these suggestions may work. There are often better ways to solve player incompatibility problems, though.)

Gaming women—heck, geek women of all shapes and sizes—are in short supply, yes, but just because there's one in your game doesn't mean she wants to go out with you. Any small social group is the perfect forum for finding a significant other, especially one with similar interests, but it's vital to remember that she may

SECRETS FOR THE MASTER

not be looking for the same thing. There's nothing wrong with flirting, and it can add some spice to a session, in-game and out, but if it makes her (or the spectators!) uncomfortable, it's best to back off. There aren't many things that can destroy a player's interest in a group or a game faster than knowing she'll be consistently pressured and/or harassed by the folks with whom she's choosing to spend her leisure time. Set boundaries at the beginning, or ask her about it if she seems to be weirded out or unhappy. Remember the fear factor discussion! Even if you're all friends, the potential for weird stalker-esque situations is not something conducive to relaxation.

Once families and children enter the picture, as they almost inevitably do once a gaming group hits a certain average age, leisure time becomes desperately short, especially for women. Family roles are still heavily influenced by the standards of the last century, and women, despite their heavy presence in the work force, still seem to end up with an above-average amount of the domestic duties. Whether it's cooking dinners or chasing after the kids, running a home can take a lot of time and effort away from hobbies and leisure activities, including this one. A woman's schedule is likely to be less flexible than a man's, especially if she has very young children. Gaming can often fall by the wayside, and the group may find it harder to set schedules and may end up leaving her out or dissolving completely.

If both partners are in the same gaming group, it can be a problem to balance child care with gaming. If you find yourself with players in this situation, make an effort to suggest that she not always be the one to miss games. If the parents are in different groups it can be easier, but scheduling child care may still be an unavoidable issue. You may want to sit down with your player and ask her for ideas if she seems to be facing these difficulties. A great way to handle this occurs when more than one person in the gaming group has kids: Set up a rotating play date when the kids can play together, either at the location where the game is taking place or under the care of one of the nongamer parents. If one of the partners not involved in the game (or a different member of the gaming group each time, so that no one misses too much) takes the whole pile of kids for a few hours, it will free up the group to play



and the other nongamers to have some time to themselves.

Kids or no kids, partnered or single, cruising or shy, new to gaming or a veteran, the best way to get women into the hobby of gaming in general or into your group in particular is by being open and aware. Understand that her perception of events may not be the same as yours or the men in your group, and that things you think nothing of may be disturbing to her (or conversely that things that disturb you may make her laugh maniacally). Be aware that schedules may be ruled by different priorities, especially if some members of your group have young children. Be aware also that the way you treat her character—especially if that treatment is disproportionately focused on sexuality—can be seen as the way you would like to treat her. Most of all, use common sense—treat her as you would any member of your group and respect her comfort levels. Bringing different perspectives to the gaming table can open up whole new worlds of adventure, and it would be a shame to miss out because of simple misunderstandings or misperceptions.

# TIPS FROM THE MASTERS

## The Beginner's Game: How to Attract and Keep New RPG Players

by John Nephew

Copyright ©1995 by John Nephew. First published in *Dragon Magazine*.

My first roleplaying experience, more than a decade ago, was with the *AD&D* game. I played a daring paladin who verged on the superhuman. Only after I had some experience as a GM myself did I realize that my gamemaster had manipulated the game shamelessly. The proof was the published modules he had sent me through; they were very different in print from my experiences in play! But I didn't know that at the time. What I did know was how much fun I had. It led me to start playing the *D&D* game and eventually to become a professional game writer.

Based on my experience of joining the roleplaying community, and my own successes and failures of drawing in more members, I have some ideas to answer the perennial question that GMs in every system inevitably face: What is the best way to get new players involved?

To answer this question, let's set out the goals we want to achieve. I suggest the following, in order of importance:

**Entertain the player:** A gamemaster wants to entertain his players. If the players don't enjoy themselves, the game session safely can be labeled a failure. This is especially true for new players; if their "first impression" roleplaying experiences are negative or boring, it is difficult to cajole would-be gamers into another go. Veteran players, on the other hand, tend to accept ups and downs because they know such are inevitable over the course of months and years of playing. What constitutes satisfying entertainment, of course, is up for discussion.

**Make the player want to play again:** Roleplaying isn't a one-time experience, like a movie or play; it's not enough to please the audience with a single perfor-

mance. A successful first game not only entertains but intrigues, and makes the neophyte long to play again.

**Introduce the player to the rules of the game:** At the end of the first game, a new player should have some idea of the basic elements of game mechanics. This doesn't mean a comprehensive, or even working, knowledge; but a player of Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* game, as an example, ought to understand the "Sanity" character trait after the first session.

**Assimilate the neophyte with the other players:** Achieving all of the above goals can be complicated when the gamemaster is working within an established campaign, and the interests (and even jealousies) of other players enter the equation.

These four goals are intertwined. The best beginner's experience, I believe, incorporates them all. Here I am focusing chiefly on the first two goals.

The approach I suggest is liberality. Be nice to new players; in fact, give their characters special advantages. "Cheat" if you must, because for the GM with a new player, the end does justify the means. Make "the beginner's game" just that.

A lot of gamers will be aghast at this suggestion, so let me provide my rationale. Perhaps from their wargame heritage, RPG's often carry a half-guilty feeling that nothing can be unless the dice and the strict letter of the rulebook say so. In wargaming, where player is pitted against player, this is an essential metarule without which the game would dissolve. For roleplaying games, the situation is vastly different. The goal is not fairness, or even (except in special cases, like tournaments) a test or competition of playing skill and ingenuity. Rather, it is an event in which the joy and success of one is ideally shared and multiplied into the pleasure of all. The question is not "How can I get the most out of the rules?" or "How can I do better than so-and-so?", but "How can we make this more fun for everyone?" In a long-term campaign outlook, rules and strictness may be important, but for the beginner's game the world should be different.

Let's examine, point-by-point, the application of the "liberal approach" across various stages of the beginner's game.

**Note:** I am assuming that neophyte gamers have not read the rulebook of the system in question. This may be a wise decision on the GM's part—not wanting to inundate the beginner with too much data. ("Here, read

## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

all the *AD&D* 2nd Edition game rules and player supplements, then we'll schedule your first game sometime next year.") Or it may just be circumstance: A new player probably has never read the rule; in fact, he might never before have heard of roleplaying and we'll hope he is eager to play without delay. Players who have read the rules may have different expectations than those who haven't. The GM must be sensitive to their different perceptions.

## Character Generation

This first step is perhaps the most perilous. How a GM helps a player create his first character may indelibly mark the gamer's entire career. Approach with caution!

The main consideration here is that the neophyte doesn't know what things mean. This makes it of little use to pile up the possibilities of, say, all the *AD&D* game races multiplied by the classes multiplied by the character kits from the supplementary player manuals. The neophyte may be confused, even intimidated, by the wealth of data.

A second consideration is that the character should be playable. This means it should be able to survive the challenges it will face, and it should be a fun character to play. A 300-hit-point tank is high on survival but low on personality—and little fun for a neophyte being inducted into *roleplaying*. Conversely, a delightfully quirky character may be great fun to play, but without a little resistance to the elements of the game world, the beginner's first game will be woefully short. The two aspects need to be balanced. Here are some approaches:

### Pregenerated PCs

In this simple option, the GM makes several characters before the start of the game and offers the neophyte the choice among them. The GM then explains to the player what the different aspects of the character are—statistics, skills, and so forth.

The downside is that pregenerated characters may offer too little room for the new player's self-expression. It is vital that the player be as wholly engaged in the game as possible. That's what makes roleplaying different from reading books and watching movies.

### Fudging and Manipulation

I think this is the least preferable choice, because it sets the neophyte in the wrong mindframe: tampering directly with the "reality" of the game. For an experienced GM, discreet tampering is fine—the GM is supposed to be in control, and with greater knowledge of what lies ahead, it's his prerogative to manipulate circumstances (without the players' knowledge) to bring forth a satisfying game. Players' tampering is destabilizing, both because it may hamper the GM and because it erodes the shared faith in the "reality" of the game world.

### As the Dice May Fall ...

The opposite extreme is to go by the letter of the law in character design. Roll the dice and accept what they tell you. An advantage of this approach is that it helps establish the "impartiality" and thus the believability of the game world. The disadvantage is that the player may get stuck with a lousy character. Don't worry too much about that, though: It's easy enough to ease the player's rite of passage, even if he is burdened with a below-average adventurer (see "First Adventures," below).

In some games, characters are not dictated by the roll of the dice. Instead players receive a number of points to "spend" among abilities and skills. This can be tricky for the beginner, who doesn't necessarily know the subtleties of the system. The GM should lend a helping hand, trying to discern what sort of character the player would enjoy and suggesting how to allocate resources to maximize the character's suitability for the role.

### Limited Options

With point-allocation systems, limiting the player's options can be important. Indeed, for all neophyte character-generation approaches, limiting may be a good thing. A new player may not be ready to deal with all the complex alternatives available to an experienced one.

Some games limit automatically. For example, a first-time *D&D* wizards has only one spell to worry about; no starting character in Chaosium's *Prince Valiant* game is too difficult for a beginner. Others don't: A starting magus in Atlas Games' *Ars Magica* game will have a formidable repertoire of formulaic spells (each of which

# ADVENTURES FROM THE MASTERS

the player needs to understand to use effectively), plus the capability of spontaneous magic (the subtleties of which can be a game unto itself).

The GM knows more than the neophyte; he should take advantage of his knowledge to present an abbreviated list of options from which the player can then choose.

## First Adventures

With character readied, the GM and player have passed their first hurdle and are ready for the second, the adventure. What elements should a beginning adventure contain?

First, start small. The disinherited peasant lad (or lass) out to find his fortune is perfect. Everyone feels like the bottom of the heap in the real world sometimes, so the “peasant” is personally identifiable. Moreover, the provincial ignorance of a peasant perfectly suits the neophyte’s ignorance of the game and world. In a modern game like Atlas Games’ *Over the Edge*, foreigners and tourists are good beginning characters for the same reason.

Second, go big. In short, hand them the world. Why not? It’s glorious, it’s heroic. Don’t do it right away, of course ... but be generous in the awarding of experience, wealth, magic, or technology. Then provide foes worthy of the characters’ growing stature.

Is the character actually worthy of this progress? Probably not. Most game rules are balanced so that progress is moderate, requiring months or years of play to achieve high levels. Experienced roleplayers often like this approach. If this is so with the rules of your game, ignore the rules! Set a more aggressive pace, fudging rules and rolls (without the player’s knowledge, if possible), as expedient. (If you’re willing to do this, then it won’t matter so much if the dice produced a lackluster character at the start.)

In a fantasy game, this may mean that the characters soon rule the empire (whichever empire your world sports, or whichever one the PCs forge), by conquest or discovery of a secret heritage. Remember the fairy tales and myths in which the nameless orphan turns out to be heir to the throne? It’s a winning theme. It’s hooked audiences for millennia, and it’ll work on the new player, too.

Does this make for nasty “power gaming?” Maybe. But that wasn’t the point—remember, this is a beginner’s campaign. The GM doesn’t want to run the game like this forever. But generosity at the start will entertain, engross, and “hook” the new player. That means the GM’s goals have been reached.

A great outline for the ideal beginner’s campaign progressing is contained in the *Star Wars* movie trilogy: glory, thrills, narrow escapes, and unbelievable coincidences. It’s no mistake that the movies were such a broad-based success; the themes and plot direction are instantly attractive. If you can pull people into your game like *Star Wars* pulled them into the theaters, you’re on the road to success.

## Continuing the Game

Eventually, a player will tire of the “power gaming” approach suggested above. It will become apparent that ruling empires is not the only path in life, and indeed may not be the most interesting. After the player’s character has established the Mighty Empire, the GM can cajole the player into trying something different.

The great thing about an RPG is the variety of perspectives it affords. With a living game world, players can look down from the palatial towers of the emperor, mighty conqueror of distant lands. Then they can take on the vantage of the mercenary warrior in the emperor’s army, the daring thief in the Imperial Capital, or whatever.

A shift in perspective occurs. The neophyte begins with an inward view: his character, making his way against the strange world. Given that perspective, the GM needs to cater to it by ultimately granting glorious success, filling the player’s need for dramatic and personal satisfaction: the happy ending.

In seeing the game world, the player matures and appreciates dynamics that go beyond personal tribulations. A player in a campaign using R. Talsorian’s *Cyberpunk* game rules may realize that blowing away corporate armies has a global impact; the star-faring captain in a *Traveller* game may glimpse the diversity of alien worlds; the fantasy emperor may see the fascinating lives unfolding outside his palace walls. The player will want to follow through that impact, visit those worlds, and experience those lives. A roleplaying game makes that possible.

## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

When the now-experienced player becomes a wily thief in the Imperial Capital, for example, it is no longer necessary that success comes so easily. The mature player has seen the world and understands that the new character is but a small part of the greater imagined reality. Pleasure can be garnered from more subtle rewards than gross personal success. After all, the thief may fall prey to the laws and watchmen of the emperor the same player once played!

## Rules and Assimilation

The third and fourth goals from the opening of this article—introducing game mechanics and assimilating new and old players—I will treat only in passing.

How a GM chooses to introduce the game's rules depends on the GM. Some GMs I've known like to keep all the rules and all the dice to themselves. Others, possibly the majority, like to have their players fully involved. For beginners, I think the middle course works best.

Assimilation is a touchy matter. If you have a mixed group, the trick is to use your experienced players to make the neophyte's experience more pleasurable. Talk with the old pros beforehand—let them know that you may be giving the new player some preferential treatment in light of his inexperience.

The experienced players don't need to resent this; after all, it's in their interest to have a thriving game group, and encouraging new players is essential to that goal. Talented roleplayers will take advantage of the situation by encouraging "in character" interaction with the new player, at once introducing and developing their own characters while helping the neophyte do the same.

If the old players don't sit well with this, it's always possible to run the new player (or better yet, a group of neophytes) separately. Give him some one-on-one adventures, possibly even a whole campaign, before introducing his character to the rest of the group. Separate play also may help the new character "catch up" in game statistics terms with the veteran PCs.

## Conclusion

A lot of roleplayers complain of trouble finding people to play with. Some view this as the consequence of a limited pool of gamers—there are only so many roleplayers to go around. I think the key to vitality, both

for the individual and for our entire hobby, is to seek out new converts, people who have never gamed before, and show them what fun it can be. I hope I have helped suggest ways to make those new players' first experiences the best possible, and keep 'em coming back for more.

## NPCs—Not Paper Cutouts

by Lee Gold

Copyright 2002© by Lee Gold, editor of *Alarums and Excursions*: <http://theStarport.com/xeno/aande.html>

Your GMing style should depend on the game that you're running—not just what rules or scenario module you're using, but on your own personality and the personalities of your players. The only GMing secrets I have to give you are the ones that work for me, in my campaigns with my players.

I don't use professional modules but prefer to make up my own world. I don't start by buying or writing a scenario of what'll happen to the PCs but prefer winging it, improvising what they encounter when they wander into new territory (physical or psychological) that I haven't worked up in detail. My players are middle-aged adults (like me), and we all think of the game as a drama we're watching, cheering on all of the PC heroes, confident that each of them will end up having a fair amount of time in the limelight during the course of this game so that the players don't feel that their PCs have to compete with one another (or with the NPCs) for attention.

You may have a very different sort of game. If so, I think the ideas below will still be useful, but I could be wrong.

I think the GM's most important job is to create and roleplay the nonplayer characters. If your NPCs are two-dimensional, boring, paper cut-outs, the players will probably follow your example, and that's the sort of characters they'll roleplay too. You'll all have a more boring game than you need to. What's more, a GM with two-dimensional NPCs has to work much harder when it comes to figuring out what the NPCs will be doing in the next session, and won't have as much fun doing it.

So get to know your NPCs.

# ADVENTURES FROM THE MASTERS

## Major NPCs

Let's start with the major nonplayer characters. Give them complex interesting personalities. That applies even to the villains. On second thought, that applies especially to the villains. It's unrealistic to be Evil because you hate Good and like hurting victims. Of course, it's also unrealistic to be 100% goody-goody. Every villain should have a well hidden nice streak; every hero should have a well hidden nasty streak or vulnerable area.

Above all, remember that not all NPCs fit neatly into the categories of Villain, Ally, Henchman, Victim, and Local Color. Some of them may even think that *they're* the heroes. Some may fit into several of the above categories, with the side that shows depending on what's happening at the given moment. People are like icebergs: Most of what's going on is below water, invisible. Even the people themselves aren't aware of what they're up to subconsciously.

Give your major NPCs Fears. Give them Dreams. Give them a code of morality (that they sometimes fall short of and feel guilty about no matter how much they rationalize). Most of all, *give them plans*. Long-range plans that the PCs may not figure out immediately.

Prepare for each session by remembering the major NPCs' plans and how they will affect the events that the PCs will experience. Remember that the major NPCs' plans should reflect each person's individuality (as partially shown in their gaming stats)—not just the intelligence and prudence (or wisdom or whatever your favorite game calls it), but the personality. Does the person prefer to be obvious or subtle, intimidating or friendly? Do the plans include fallbacks for what to do in case something goes wrong? Does the person carry out his plans directly or through intermediaries?

For instance, think about the NPC's home, whether it's a feudal lord's castle or a peasant hut in the wilderness, an apartment in a high-rise building or a starship. Did the designer aim for something elegant or something strong, something in the current fashion or something that blends into the neighborhood?

Did the NPC build it (or have it built by a contractor), purchase it from the original inhabitant, inherit it, steal it, conquer it, or find it abandoned? Is it fully furnished, or is the NPC still saving up (time or money or parts and ingredients) in order to get certain special furnishings? Is it fully in use? Maybe there are parts of it even the NPC doesn't fully understand.

Just what kind of defenses it has will depend on the NPC's wealth and on the culture, but every NPC should have the equivalent of being able to lock the doors and windows, scream for help from the neighbors and passers-by, and phone the police. A prudent NPC has more defenses than that. A wealthy one will be able to afford a professional security adviser. An intelligent one may be able to outthink all the approaches would-be attackers are likely to try, but an imprudent brilliant person may not bother to do so until there's a crisis.

Of course, give your major NPCs a past. How did they get to where they are? If nothing else, decide how they got their most impressive skills and possessions.

- Did the NPC learn the skill from a beloved mentor or from an arrogant teacher hired by the family? Maybe the NPC is self-taught, slowly learning the skill based





# SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

on experience and a few obscure hints in a decaying manuscript or a crumbling painting.

- Did the NPC inherit that favorite weapon, take it from a dead enemy, or pay to have it created? In the former two cases, who was the weapon made for, and does it have resources that the NPC isn't aware of?

- Did the NPC get money by inheriting it? Stealing it? Earning it? (As an employee or an independent contractor, or by running a small business?) Does the NPC keep the bulk of that money at home, in an institution like a bank, or invested in a business (and who owns the bank or the business)?

- How does the NPC safeguard those treasured possessions? Bodyguards? A burglar alarm? Traps? Whatever the method, it should be something the NPC can afford and that's in character.

Some games generate character personalities using Tarot-like cards or by picking words that will embody the character's key traits. My own favorite method is to use horoscopes—not just the sun sign that you'll find in a daily newspaper column but the full horoscope: Sun (preferred sorts of action), Moon (preferred sorts of environment), Mercury (type of intellect: subtle or straightforward, bookish or physical), Venus (type of romance), Mars (way of reacting to conflict, including way of showing anger and fear), Jupiter (way of giving and receiving gifts). If you have twelve-sided dice, you can easily roll for each of these, or you can buy a book on reading a horoscope. It may not work for real people, but it's a wonderful technique for fleshing out fictional characters.

Does all that sound like too much trouble? Think of the trouble it'll save you. No need to plan out every detail of the scenario in advance: You just have to roleplay the NPCs. No need to use dice to determine a magic or high-tech gadget's special abilities: You just have to decide what sort of things the original buyer wanted—and was able to pay for.

## Villains

All too often we design a nonplayer character as a villain when the person doesn't really need to be particularly evil. Most so-called villains are really just competing with the PCs in order to achieve the same goals (money, power, fame). Remember that there are many different sorts of morality and almost nobody has

a self-image as despicable, slimy, rotten, and evil. (Some of the NPC competitors may even think of the PCs as villains because they don't meet the proper rules for moral or mannerly behavior.)

If you think your players don't want their PCs competing with a sympathetic NPC who has a complex personality, then remember that some of the most vicious deeds committed in our own world were perpetrated by people who were Just Doing This For Your Own Good (burning you alive to save your soul) or Just Doing This To Protect Myself (putting you in a prison camp so you wouldn't betray them by allying with the enemy). Self-righteousness and fear can produce very villainous actions and can be a lot more interesting to roleplay than the stereotypical villain's motivations.

Now think of some small trait of redeeming social importance (in the eyes of the PCs, and ideally also in the eyes of the players) and give it to your villain. A loving marriage. Love for a cute little child or a wonderful animal pet. Great artistic talent. A long history of charitable contributions on which many wonderful poor people are dependent. A brilliant mind (with the person obsessed by the goal of attaining knowledge, not really aware or caring about the horrible side effects that this quest is having on other people).

Or find some problem that makes the villain pitiful (in the eyes of the PCs, and ideally also in the eyes of the players). Being a cripple. Being mentally retarded or senile. Dying of a loathsome and painful disease. Being very young or very old. Being the last survivor of a destroyed culture. Being brainwashed or conditioned or possessed by evil spirits, with the true personality occasionally emerging to scream for help.

## Ally

All too often we design a nonplayer character as an ally and make the person totally dependable. It's true that each GM needs some way to give the PCs information they can totally rely upon. Even so, remember that the best of allies has a life that doesn't revolve totally around the PCs.

*An ally's memory isn't perfect.* The NPC might forget to mention things that later turn out to be important.

*Allies don't know everything on a subject.* Some of

# ADVICE FROM THE MASTERS

what they know may turn out to be an overgeneralization. (You can signal this by prefacing it with “The way my grandfather used to tell it” or “The way I learned it in school” or even “The gossip is that.”) Some of what they don’t know may turn out to be very significant indeed.

*An ally has commitments.* To friends and family, job and hobbies, and many other things besides the PCs. That means the ally won’t always be available at times convenient to the PCs. Sometimes the PCs might not even be able to find out where the ally has gone.

*An ally’s morale and loyalty depend on how he is treated.* If the PCs are thoughtless, rude, or nasty to the ally, don’t be surprised if he ends up turning away from them or even betraying them. What goes around comes around.

## Henchmen

Let’s move on to the henchmen, the followers of one of the major nonplayer characters above (or perhaps even the followers of our heroes, the PCs). In opera, this sort of character is often referred to as a spear carrier (because they don’t have any dialogue, just a weapon), and this characterization also applies to many roleplaying game NPCs. Novelists and dramatists sometimes refer to these characters as cannon fodder because their chief purpose is to be killed onstage as background color to the fight (this characterization also applies to many roleplaying game NPCs, even if we use lots of other ways besides cannons to kill unimportant nonplayer characters).

Some GMs find mass destruction of faceless entities boring, but I don’t think we can afford to sneer at a practice adopted by such great fantasy writers as J. R. R. Tolkien (with so many faceless orcs) and great science fiction film makers as George Lucas (with so many

faceless Imperial troopers). However, that’s still no reason to make all the henchmen into carbon copies of one another.

Look at their weapons and armor. Did they get them from an assembly line or did they come up with them themselves? If the former, have they all been trained in how to use these weapons? If the latter, have they had any training in fighting together using different weapons?

Wargamers (and some roleplayers) like buying little metal miniatures and painting them (or spending lots of money buying pre-painted ones). Some roleplayers like painting little paper miniatures (or buying printed ones) and putting them in stands. Some cut out tiny pictures from newspapers or magazines and glue them onto cardboard backing. Some just cut up cardboard into small squares and number them. One way or another, as GM you’re going to have to keep track of which henchmen are wounded or spellbound or dead. The more you individuate them, the less boring it will be to keep track of them.

If you’re not into miniatures, think about starting a collection of different six-sided dice (different colors, different materials, different sizes). (In fact, if you’re like most of the roleplayers I know, you’ve probably already inadvertently accumulated a collection of six-sided dice.) Use these dice as the miniatures for the henchmen. This means you can use the number on top to indicate

something about that particular NPC: 1 means uninjured, 2 lightly wounded, 3 severely wounded; 4 under a spell, 5 ....

Most games give you sample characters for each of the sentient species; some even give you sample warriors and wizards (or scientists and engineers), rogues, and other types of characters. You should spend a couple of hours working up five different versions of each of these samples: average (the same as the rules unless you want to tweak things for your particular campaign), horrible, below average, above average, and wonder-

**“...I don’t think we can afford to sneer at a practice adopted by such great fantasy writers as J. R. R. Tolkien...and great science fiction film makers as George Lucas... However, that’s still no reason to make all the henchmen into carbon copies of one another.”**

# SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

ful. Now you can roll a ten-sided die for each henchman, with 1 being Horrible, 2–3 Below Average, 4–7 Average, 8–9 Above Average, and 0 Wonderful. The henchman’s quality should determine the character’s stats, combat skills, defense equipment, resistance to damage (sometimes called hit points), and other factors.

Think about the henchmen’s relationship to their leader. Are they volunteers or drafted? All healthy young adults, or people of all ages (some of them sick, or perhaps healing up from wounds suffered in previous combats)? Are they content because they’re well paid and cared for, or are they ready to desert?

Even if you’re creating the henchmen in a hurry, remember that they have still known one another for a while and so should still care about one another. They ought to come to one another’s defense (unless the person being attacked is the one the whole troop hates).

Pick out at least one of the henchmen (horrible or wonderful or average) and give him a line or two of dialogue (perhaps spoken to the PCs, perhaps spoken to the other NPCs). Try to come up with something that’ll let the player characters realize dimly that each of these characters has a bit more to them than just being set up to be slaughtered. Even a piece of paper that’s only a millimeter thick is three-dimensional, and your henchmen should be the same.

## Victims

Victims are great ways to make a plotline interesting because they need protecting, rescuing, and avenging. But they shouldn’t be totally gullible stupid wimps, if only because the PCs (and players) usually despise people like that, and victims ought to seem sympathetic.

So give each victim who’s going to have any dialogue at all besides “I want my mommy!” some psychological and physical strengths as well as weaknesses. This may let you eventually turn one-time victims into longstanding allies, which will make your game world more interesting and more complex.

If you have a long-range storyline that involves a major NPC victim (who’ll have to be sacrificed in order to achieve an important PC goal), start that person out as an ally: someone who rescues the PCs occasionally and gets rescued by them occasionally, so as to make the final decision even more heart-rending.

## Local Color

Finally, there are the chance-met people: the passers-by in the street scene, the fellow shoppers at a store (and the store owners), the audience at the theater, the firefighters and police, the neighbors . . . . The PCs aren’t liable to be fighting them, but they will want to talk to them now and then.

You don’t have time to do detailed work-ups of each and every one of them, but you still shouldn’t let them be two-dimensional. And you don’t have to. There’s an easy way to get to know what interests them, their strong spots and their weak spots. Use the Vices and Virtues. Pick each character’s besetting Sin and Virtue (and roll for it as 12 + a six-sided die). Roll the others on three six-sided dice. Use these results to inspire your characterization of these people’s areas of interests and then build on that to roleplay the character as being able to lie or tell the truth convincingly, withdrawn or outgoing, polite or rude, competent or incompetent.

## Seven Deadly Sins (slightly revised)

Anger

Envy

Gluttony (including anorexia nervosa and bulimia, plus overindulging in drugs and alcohol)

Greed (shown as miserliness or overspending)

Lust

Pride (including perfectionism and self-righteousness, which leads to sneering at other people)

Wasting Time (including laziness, procrastination, and overindulgence in a hobby)

You could add three more for a roll on a ten-sided die:

Cowardice (and foolhardiness)

Egocentricity (including both megalomania and self-hatred)

Gossip

## Seven Virtues (slightly revised)

Faith (in some social institution like the government or church, or in a person, whether a well known social leader, an obscure friend, a relative, or a teacher)

Fortitude (also known as strength, courage, perseverance, willpower, or self-discipline)

Hope (also known as morale)

# ADVENTURES FROM THE MASTERS

Justice (perhaps based on the official laws, perhaps based on moral considerations)

Kindness (sometimes called charity or lovingness, which leads not just to giving money to others but also treating them politely, in accordance with the Golden Rule)

Prudence (also known as wisdom)

Temperance (keeping to the happy medium between extreme positions, many of which are illustrated in the Seven Deadly Sins above)

And three more for a roll on a ten-sided die:

Honesty and Reliability

Sense of Humor and Proportion (which leads to not taking small things too seriously)

Verifying Facts (which leads to knowledge)

Or perhaps you'd like to create your own lists of bad and good qualities. Feel free to do so. Just make sure they're not too complex. Ideally, you should be able to pick up four dice (say, two ten-sided dice and two six-sided dice) and roll for worst sin (and how bad) and strongest virtue (and how good) to get a handle on a chance-met NPC. The more complicated the system, the less able you'll be to use it on the fly—and the less useful it'll be to you.

When you're making up your list of sins and virtues, remember that you (probably) are not the world's best actor. Don't design NPCs you don't think you can roleplay well. If there's a sin that's never tempted you or a virtue that doesn't appeal to you, then you probably don't understand it well enough to roleplay it convincingly and shouldn't make it the key to a character's personality. If there's a type of person that you dislike (or respect) too much to be able to roleplay them, don't use that. (Or find a friend in your gaming group who'll volunteer to roleplay some of the NPCs that you don't feel confident at attempting.)

Last of all, remember that no matter how interesting you make your NPCs, the PCs should always be more interesting, at the center of the limelight. After all, without players, what's the point of GMing?

That means don't ever let your game turn into you talking to yourself by having one of your NPCs have a long conversation with one or more of the other NPCs. Somehow or other, involve the players in everything that happens (even if it means lending out one or more of the NPCs to the players during some important scene when all the PCs are offstage or otherwise unable to

say or do anything important).

And if some day one of your players asks to take one of your NPCs as a PC, then know that you've just achieved the ultimate goal of roleplaying NPCs so that they're not just two-dimensional paper cut-outs: You've made them as interesting as PCs.

## Winging It: The Fine Art of Making It Up as You Go Along

by Jean Rabe

Copyright ©2002 by Jean Rabe

Running published scenarios is great ... when you can get away with it.

Creating your own adventures is good, too ... if your players are willing to go along with the plot.

But sometimes a gamemaster doesn't have the luxury of either option. Sometimes he has to make it up as the game session progresses.

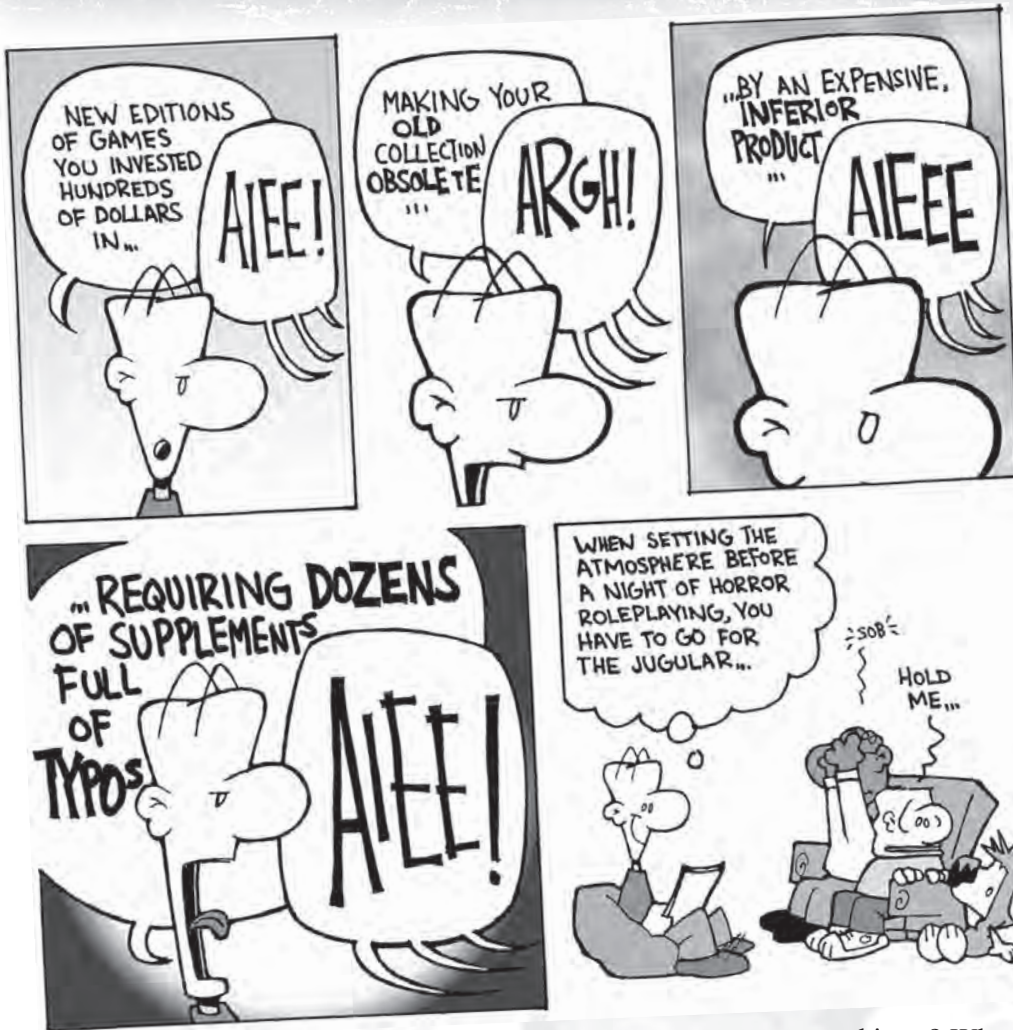
I used to spend an inordinate amount of time preparing for a single gaming session, whether I was running *Star Wars*, *D&D*, or an old superhero game I loved called *Villains & Vigilantes*. I had to craft nearly all the adventures myself, as my players either worked for game companies and therefore edited and wrote the adventures that were published, or they often purchased all the adventures for their own collections. I couldn't even use the nifty scenarios printed in *Dungeon Magazine* or *Pyramid*—several of my players had subscriptions.

So I'd pull out my notebook and start from scratch.

Sometimes I would craft scenarios out of the proverbial whole cloth. Sometimes I would borrow plots from science-fiction or fantasy movies and novels, tinker with them, and add the necessary elements to make them fit into my world. I would "stat out" the main villains and assorted other NPCs, detail any relevant monsters, settle on the available rewards, and make some nifty maps.

In short, this entailed putting quite a bit of work into my every-other-week game. I usually didn't mind devoting the time, as it certainly beat watching television most evenings, and the players and I were having fun.

SECRETS FROM THE MASTER



So all my efforts paid off.

For a few years.

Then my gaming group started evolving (maybe mutating is a better word). The players began straying ever farther from my painstakingly engineered plots and drifting into adventures I was forced to fabricate as they went along. Oh, I'd present them with several "hooks" in an attempt to draw them into my original story:

- In my *D&D* game villagers might try to hire them to clear out the monsters inhabiting a nearby silver mine.
- In my *Star Wars* game their band of heroes could be tasked with rescuing a small group of Rebel sympathizers.
- In *Villains & Vigilantes* the local supervillain group might deign to challenge them to a rumble.

I'd also have back-up hooks in case my first adven-

ture didn't suit their tastes that night or the original adventure ran shorter than I'd anticipated. Trouble was ... my players always seemed to have their own idea of what they wanted to do for the evening.

"Clear out the monsters from an old silver mine? Ha! The monsters're probably just goblins. There are plenty of other adventurers around who can do that! We've never been to the Spindeward Flats to the southeast. We want to go see what's there! And we'll stop in the first town along the way and do some shopping. I need a better shield and some new boots. Yeah, let's go shopping!"

"What? They want us to rescue a small group of Rebel sympa-

thizers? Who are they kidding? It's gotta be a trap! They'll lull us in, then the Imperials will jump us. Instead, we're gonna take a couple of our fast ships and head to Mos Eisley. We'll find a different kind of trouble there!"

"The supervillains want to rumble, huh? No way. Not this weekend. The last time we rumbled the Crimson Crab caved in the side of Milton's Hardware Emporium and we had to pay for all the damages. We're leaving town. There's gotta be some people in Istanbul who need help! Why, we can even make it back in time for the Sunday afternoon football game!"

I could have—through various machinations—funneled the action back into my original plots. But free time is precious, and if my players wanted to spend theirs taking their characters to the Spindeward Flats, Mos Eisley, or Istanbul, so be it!

"Winging it" became the norm.

# MONSTERS FROM THE MASTER

Initially my players knew they were taking me into those uncharted waters of making-it-up-on-the-fly. Sometimes I think they were doing it on purpose to see if I could stay one step ahead of them. Fortunately, I quickly became good enough at winging it that they were never sure when the adventure was my established plot or one they'd coerced me into creating. Along the way, I began to prefer winging an adventure: It was much more of a challenge and required far less preparation. Besides, I've always been one to enjoy surprises.

Here's an example from one of my games of how the action strayed and I was forced to wing what came next:

The players had decided during the previous session that their characters were going to Denzenburg, a town a few days down the road. They'd heard about an assassin working in the area, and clues pointed to his being in Denzenburg, a quaint farming community centrally located between three large cities. In preparation for the upcoming game I scribbled some notes about Denzenburg and the assassin, and I printed off some nifty maps from an Internet site filled with village and castle floorplans—just in case they actually decided to do this.

The game night came, the heroes surprisingly started off down the road to Denzenburg, and one player innocently asked me to describe the scenery.

"It's at the edge of autumn, and so the leaves are starting to turn vermilion and pale orange. Some have already fallen, and they're crunching softly underfoot. There's a pleasant musty scent hanging in the air, and you can hear the caw of an unseen crow and the rustle of branches in the slight breeze. The road you're on, to Denzenburg, is dusty and appears fairly well traveled. There are a couple of deep ruts to indicate heavy wagons have passed this way. And there are scattered tracks of people walking—they probably came through a day or two ago. There are side trails here and there, likely leading to farms. And the sun is hanging low in the sky, hinting that dinner time is near."

The second to the last sentence was MISTAKE #1. But once uttered—

"Side trails, Jean? Tell us about the side trails!"

I tried to correct my mistake: "Yes, you've passed a few. The only one you see now is overgrown. There are some dead trees along one side of it. Nothing really

interesting. Doesn't look like it's been used in quite some time." MISTAKE #2.

"Dead trees? Hmmm. I wanna check out the dead trees. Hasn't been used in a while? I wonder why?"

Trying to correct the second mistake: "There are dead trees along the main road you're on, too. There's nothing special about the dead trees."

*"Yeah, but you said the side trail is overgrown and has dead trees. I wanna check it out. I wanna see what killed the trees. And I wanna see why no one has been using this trail."*

Still trying to get them to follow the main road and hence my plot: "You examine the dead trees, and you can't really tell what killed them. Some are large; maybe they died because they were old."

"Maybe 'cause they were old. Or maybe because of lightning? Maybe some disease?"

"Maybe."

*"Maybe. Hmmm. So maybe they died because of something else. Maybe magic."* Now the one inquisitive player had a few other folks interested. "I'm gonna check for tracks. And then I'm gonna cast speak with animals and see if any critters can tell me what made the trees die and why no one uses this trail."

"You don't see any tracks. And you don't see any critters to talk to." MISTAKE #3. I should have produced a hawk that hinted that the trees died because of a drought or something and that no one uses the trail because the farm it leads to is abandoned. But I wasn't thinking quickly enough. And I should have sprinkled in a few goblin tracks. The heroes were too high-level to concern themselves with goblins. In fact, they avoided goblins.

"Dead trees. No animals. No tracks. Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm."

The entire group was interested now. Denzenburg and the assassin were forgotten. The players spent the rest of the evening going down this side trail trying to puzzle out a mystery that didn't at the moment exist.

So for the next four or five hours I produced more dead trees, these all eventually pointing to a massive dead oak bigger around than an elephant. Along the way there were corrupted and undead animals that left no tracks and mutated spiders with wings (the flying spiders were great). The "monsters" all had variable hit points, armor classes, and abilities, as I was making

## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

it all up as I went along. And as the heroes fought the beasties, my mind churned to fabricate what was behind all of it.

I came up with: The massive oak was once home to a dryad, who was killed by an evil sorcerer when she tried to shoo him from her woods. Her lingering spirit had merged with the tree and become fouled by an insidious sentient tome the sorcerer had buried in the hollow of the tree. Like a cancer, the evil had spread outward from the tree, tainting the woods and the creatures. Okay, that sounds a little simplistic. There was actually a little more to it than that.

In any event, the heroes found and destroyed the tome—after defeating the dead oak and its protectors—and set everything right in the woods. Then they went back to the main road and headed into Denzenburg. At least one of them was convinced that the assassin they were hunting was connected to the evil sorcerer. As the group traveled, I decided that the assassin *was* the evil sorcerer. And it wouldn't be the heroes hunting him—he would be after them looking for a little revenge. They had destroyed his insidious sentient tome, after all, and ended his carefully planned corruption of the woods.

Sometimes adventures made up on the fly are the best!

## Look Confident

With a little concentration, a gamemaster can hide that she's winging an adventure. Players deviating from a plot can't ruffle a gamemaster who wears a countenance of confidence, who looks like she knows what she's doing. Act like you're prepared for the unexpected and that you've plenty of materials to cover all the eventualities. Make the players believe that they're not really straying from your plot—that what their characters are doing is all part of the grand scheme of the adventure.

Flutter through notepaper. Always have a couple of notebooks—the players don't know that one might be filled with recipes and that as you turn the pages your mind is churning with what to throw at them next. Scribble a few ideas. Roll some dice. And announce what happens next.

A gamemaster with a strong voice, a good dose of creativity, an appearance of self-assurance, and a “poker face” will rule!

## Winging It with Some Help

- Maps are important—have a stack on hand. They might be to castles, dungeons, villages, graveyards, towers, sewer systems, solar systems, whatever. When the players coerce the gamemaster into deviating from a plot, she can look prepared for anything if she can produce maps of buildings and towns and planets they come across. The players don't have to know the maps are generic—a confident gamemaster can make it look as though she has everything covered!

- Make the maps yourself, print them off from the Internet, use photocopies out of magazines, and reuse ones from years past that the players have likely forgotten about. Sometimes it's fun to create the maps as the action moves along, drawing the map behind your gamemaster screen at the same time the players are mapping out the rooms and corridors you're describing.

- Have a few mini adventures on hand, in the event the action takes the heroes into a town or building you've already worked up, or in case the adventure strays back to some semblance of your original plot.

- Fill notecards with names and brief descriptions of NPCs and add statistics particular to the game being played. Have a box of miniatures on hand so you can produce something visual for the players—further evidence of being prepared.

- Take notes of what you fabricate. Taking notes *correctly* is very important—of NPCs you create on the spur of the moment, of towns, establishments, roads. If you don't take notes, the players will trip you up, and then you'll be forced to do some “serious winging.” See below.

## The Golden Dragon Inn

In my *D&D* game, the player characters always check into an inn as soon as they arrive at a town. It's their schtick. They want to stow their gear and clean up before strolling around and listening for rumors. And they always want to know what the available inns look like, their names, and what the prices are.

One night they stayed at the Golden Dragon Inn, a rather opulent establishment that had a large dining room, plenty of sleeping rooms, and a gambling den in the back. I jotted down these amenities as I went along, and I even named the proprietor: Reland Stark. He was

# ADVENTURES FROM THE MASTERS

an affable middle-aged man who was losing his hair. I did not jot down the name of the town the PCs were in. **BIG MISTAKE.**

A few months later, the characters strolled into another town and asked about inns. I pulled out my notecard and tell them about the Golden Dragon Inn. There was a lot of whispering between them before they announced they were going inside to check it out. I told them there was a spacious dining room, plenty of sleeping rooms, and a gambling den in the back for evening dice sessions.

*“Is the barkeep called Reland Stark?”* one player asks. She’s looking at a string of notes on the back of her character sheet. *“Is he going bald?”*

I know they’ve caught me at something. But I don’t have time to backpeddle or to figure it out.

“Reland Stark was the proprietor of the Golden Dragon Inn down in City North. We’re hundreds of miles from City North, and here’s another Golden Dragon Inn.”

Now I’m thinking they’ve caught me at a **VERY SLOPPY MISTAKE.** I’m about ready to apologize when:

**“A good gamemaster is one who is willing to throw her storyline aside in favor of winging it...”**

“We’re going to a few other cities and see if we can find Golden Dragon Inns there, too. We want to see if they have proprietors named Reland Stark.”

*“Yeah, I think there’s some kind of conspiracy going on. Maybe they’re dens for thieves or assassins. I think we’ve really stumbled onto something big.”*

So ... of course the Golden Dragon Inn chain (twelve inns all told) became a hive for various villains and shape-shifting monsters, and all the Reland Starks were doppelgangers working for an evil mastermind. It all turned out quite nicely, and the players thought it was a plot I’d slaved over. However, it easily could have gone sour. Fortunately, I appeared confident through the whole thing and was quick to come up with the doppelganger gimmick. The thread of the Golden Dragon Inn ended up lasting a couple of years.

If I had taken proper notes, such as writing on the Golden Dragon Inn card which city it was in, I wouldn’t have had to sweat those bullets. I’m much more careful now, and I take better notes.

## Let the Players Lead You

Sometimes “winging it” is most fun when you let the players inspire your plots, such as what happened with the Golden Dragon Inn. I often let them inspire the rewards for a session.

For example, the same *D&D* characters were exploring an underground labyrinth (map courtesy of an Internet site about medieval buildings) when they came upon a casket with a sword lying on it. It was a very old sword, and I’d intended it as a hook to get them into another adventure. There was a name engraved on the side, and it was to lead them to a family immersed in some serious political intrigue.

A character picked up the sword and immediately decided it must be enchanted. (Okay, it’s enchanted now.) And that it must have been cursed, else it would have been taken before now. (Okay, it’s cursed. The character can’t set it down, short of cutting off his hand.) It must have had a special property regarding undead,

as they had fought undead to get into this chamber. (This was a good idea, too. I made the sword so that it detected undead but that the blade harmlessly

passed through undead—it could harm only the living, and it inflicted more damage on goodly-aligned folks. Wow, the character with the sword wouldn’t be able to use it to defend himself against undead...and he couldn’t put it down. Neat, huh?)

The next several adventures were spent trying to locate a wizard powerful enough to break the curse so the character could release the sword. Then they went after the political-intrigue angle, thinking the family linked to the sword was involved with an undead cult.

## Be Open to the Possibilities

A good gamemaster is one who is willing to throw her storyline aside in favor of winging it—of crafting something because her players stray from the plot. She recognizes that winging it might be more fun this evening.

A great gamemaster is one who thinks quickly and acts with confidence, making winging an evening’s game session a fine art. If she takes a few notes along the way, she can create dozens of adventures from a



# SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

few ideas her players inadvertently mention. If she is prepared with a variety of maps, NPCs, and creatures, she can make a smooth transition from her preplanned adventure to the one she's about to craft on-the-fly.

And if that gamemaster is willing to mention side trails and dead trees along the main road—she might be pleasantly surprised at how all the action plays out.

## Throw 'em to the wolves!

by Larry D. Hols

Copyright ©2002 by Larry D. Hols

Most gamemasters, with greater or lesser frequency, will find themselves in a situation where an added dose of excitement is needed in play. Whether this arises from players slacking off in pursuing character goals, players refusing to engage game conflicts, or simply from a long period of flat play is of little matter. The game needs some added spice—the players need to be

roused from the rut in which they have played themselves—and the PCs are the lever by which the GM can affect the players.

There are various techniques that can be used to achieve that goal. One that can be used to great effect, if used sparingly, is that of simply throwing the characters to the wolves, so to speak. The technique appears very simple, and at heart it is. In practice, however, it requires a bit of thought and finesse so as to not offend the sensibilities of the players. The technique can be explained by examining what it is, when it should be used, and how to do it with some subtlety.

### What is it?

This technique—lovingly called “the fresh meat approach” in some circles—involves bringing a sudden crisis for the PCs into play. This can be exemplified by the following scenario:

The PCs have been investigating a smuggling ring. Their search has brought them to a town surrounded by a forest, with a single road leading through town along a trade route and a slow-moving river nearby (along which the smugglers have been transporting goods).

One of the PCs has been particularly abrasive to the locals when questioning them about recent events. He offends one of the town's leading citizens one evening, leading to a confrontation with the constabulary (backed by all locals handy). The decision is made not to arrest the heroes, as being rude really doesn't warrant it, but enough of the townsfolk dislike the group that the PCs get escorted out of the town gates (which closed at sundown). The PCs are now deep in a dangerous forest, known to be inhabited by outlaws and dangerous beasts.

The PCs hear the gates close behind them, the parting comments of the townspeople on the safe side of the gate, and a wolf howling only a short distance away through the trees. The wolf is answered only moments later by the rest of its pack. They all sound very hungry.

The PCs, whatever they may have been concerned with prior to this, now have a sud-



# SCENARIOS FROM THE MASTERS

den crisis which demands immediate attention and action. They've been thrown to the wolves—in this case, literally—and must take action. The players must decide in short order how to handle the particular crisis and then execute that plan, in circumstances that certainly weren't foreseen and most likely for which the characters are unprepared.

In this example, the PCs have been traveling town to town and spending each night in an inn. The party is unprepared for camping, but is also unprepared for traveling through the dark of night along a dangerous road in search of a village or hamlet. Would it be advisable to find a place to hole up for the night, braving the hunt of the wolfpack from a perhaps-defensible position, or to travel and deal with the pack if it trails along? What about the outlaws known to inhabit the forest?

## When should it be used?

The technique is most appropriate when play has leveled off for some time. Leveling off is simply a term used to describe play that has become monotonous in some regard. The PCs could have been searching high and low for an underworld contact (for whom they have a letter of introduction from a past contact) and the search has stretched longer than expected. The PCs could have been spending a great deal of time dealing with clues to a puzzle and not have done anything else for some time. The heroes could have been involved in a campaign to rid an area of pests of some sort—a long string of fights with creatures that were never expected to be a threat and have met expectations.

In the example provided above, the PCs have been involved in a series of interviews with NPCs with only travel between towns—itsself a monotonous affair—to break up the activity. While necessary in the pursuit of the character's goals, the activities have provided a stretch of play that has little to offer in terms of highlighted moments. Throwing the PCs out the gate provides a moment that will serve to make traipsing about asking questions a bit more memorable.

Sometimes it may be that the players just aren't concentrating on play. They're distracted, it seems, and they're having their characters avoid engaging the machinations of the bad guys. They just don't seem to be interested in rooting out the secret agents in the Duke's court and saving the kingdom from civil war. A

sudden crisis may be just the thing to get the players engaged in play again; it provides a break from a story line that got momentarily stale.

## How is this done?

It would be a simple matter merely to drop an encounter into play and force the players to put their characters through the paces to fight a great beastie. That, however, would be a crude rendition of this technique and would most likely offend the sensibilities of some (or all) of the players involved. A gratuitous violent encounter simply isn't elegant and is a sign of ham-handed gamemastering. It is better to offer a crisis that doesn't seem to fall in from outer space on the back of a meteorite.

One of the key elements of the technique is to identify a situation in which there is no obvious, immediate solution—the GM should find a rock and a hard place between which to place the PCs. In the example, the PCs are placed between the rock of a makeshift camp with a hunting wolfpack and known outlaws nearby and the hard place of traveling a road at night under the same conditions. Another hard place (a sharp stone, perhaps?) is the town, in which safety from wolves, outlaws, and the elements can be found, but which is decidedly hostile to the group now, making sneaking in over the walls also risky. There is no obvious, immediate solution to the problem confronting the characters.

Another element to consider is that of expression. From what does the crisis arise? Is it a believable consequence of the events of play? The crisis will be more fun to play if it is experienced as an integral part of everything else that is happening in play. In the example, if the PCs had arrived at the town just prior to sundown and been turned away, the circumstances would have been suspicious, as that turn of events wouldn't have seemed reasonable. Instead of a crisis arising of what course to pursue for personal safety, the players would probably have seen the situation as meaning word of them had traveled here and the bad guys were set up to defend against them. The “problem” the players would then try to solve would be that of assaulting the hostile town.

If the PCs are attempting to root out enemy agents in the Duke's court, having a visiting noble show up and

accuse one of the PCs of a crime resulting in the jailing of that character and an effort to free him would be unreasonable. A better, more subtle fashion in which to raise a crisis would be to maneuver one of the PCs into a brief questioning of one of the many ladies at court. She wishes to raise the ardor of a sometime suitor and decides to use the “attentions” of the PC to fan the flames of jealousy in the suitor. She maneuvers the PC into a compromising situation and that creates a sudden crisis—and if another PC or two can be finagled into the mess, all the better. If the lady’s suitor is then found belly-up in the moat, things get even stickier for the heroes.

The timing of the crisis is also important. If the PCs just unearthed a clue that promises to allow them the secrets of entering the lost temple of Challah, that discovery should prove interesting enough that a sudden crisis would prove to be an exercise in frustration more than anything. If the PCs are faced with the prospect of being in the same position they were essentially in after their latest activity—say, learning nothing more after questioning a new lead—a sudden crisis would work to provide its own excitement. The players would then find turning to the next lead after the crisis is past not to be merely an experience of the “same old thing.”

## Practice makes perfect.

The key to being able to throw the PCs to the wolves with finesse and panache is simply to practice doing so. The next time play gets flat, examine the situation to see if a sudden crisis would work to perk the players up and get the PCs involved in something that will make them sweat. If the time seems right for the dash of excitement that a crisis can provide, then by all means pick the PCs up kicking and screaming and toss them out to the wolves.

# Trust at the Gaming Table

by Frank Mentzer

Copyright ©2002 by J. Franklin Mentzer

Why is trust a GM’s secret? Okay, it’s not a secret. But as long as you’re all here, why not stay with me for a few minutes? We’ll have an interesting chat.

This tome doubtless contains myriad tips on plotting, pacing, detail, vocalization, and perhaps even strategy and tactics, though such wargaming roots have withered over time as roleplayers focused more on characterization and less on survival. Regardless of the system, style, or genre, however, one element common to every roleplaying game is people—not dice, not adventures, and not even rules—just people. And all people trust or distrust when interacting, so this is at least applicable.

If we were just talking about simple card or board games, trust would of course warrant very little attention. Common techniques of dice-palming or card-sharking are adequately addressed in other works, and only occasionally do such unsavory techniques appear in the superficial pastimes of friends and family. But when roleplaying was codified in the 1970’s, it offered us a great deal of freedom and also directly tapped the vast resources of the human imagination. So in this new environment of gaming freedom, one of the first player skills to develop was Expression.

You interact, both verbally and non-, in near-continuous communication throughout an interactive roleplaying event, which may last several hours. If you are skilled in communications the results are more accurate and more timely than if you are unskilled, and more productive and hence more entertaining. After several learning experiences around the roleplaying table, first imitating and then experimenting and innovating, you thus tend to improve your skills of expression as both a person and a player. (I use the former term for behavior and dialogue that can be categorized as nongame interactions and game mechanics like rolls, and generally limit the term player to the specific portrayal of the roles.)

But of course expression involves choices. We are human, so we can make verbal errors and we can lie.

## LESSONS FROM THE MASTERS

Nearly everyone makes mistakes in communications, and errors can be caught, discussed, and usually corrected. But lies are deliberate. We can construct believable lies *in toto*. We can tiptoe around the truth, avoiding blatant falsehood but elaborating to various degrees. With skill we can tell just enough of truth-and-only-truth to convey the impression of lying. (In theory we can tell the whole truth, but that is a special case that can be ignored for now.)

## Unity of Purpose

For this thoughtful little chat, let us assume that the players and gamemaster are united in one common desire: for Everyone To Have Fun. Whether your roleplaying is a mere pastime or a dedicated hobby activity, you play the game for your personal enjoyment. (Secondary purposes are common, of course. I knew a gent who joined a campaign in lovelorn pursuit of a lass whose roleplaying hobby consumed her every spare moment. Another guy was required by his parents to monitor the activities of his younger brother. A third merely had to get out of his house as often as possible and on any pretext. But all managed to have fun.)

It is surprising how often this basic commonality is overlooked or ignored, especially so when its application can solve many problems common to roleplaying games: “So you wish to portray your mage as a brilliant eccentric who dominates those of lesser intelligence . . . do the other players enjoy your characterization? Wouldn’t a less pushy persona be better for all involved? Can’t you transcend your petty selfishness so everyone can have fun along with you?” Repeat this tenet (without levity) at an upcoming game, and if you are truly heard, that alone may significantly improve the levels of cooperation and pleasure at your gaming table.

Accept that, if you will, as the fundamental rule of your roleplaying activities. Everybody Has Fun. On that at least you’re all on the same page. So let’s take a peek at a typical game.

## Trusting Gamemasters

A gamemaster describes a situation. The players believe that description to be accurate. The characters make decisions and take actions—and something is suddenly discovered to be in conflict with the descrip-

tion. The players and gamemaster abruptly digress into a debate as to whether the relevant detail should have been offered differently. The GM may lapse into authoritarian kneejerks (“whatever I said THEN, this is the way it is NOW”) or may be more accommodating and implement a temporal backspace, as it were, returning to a point in recent gametime and correcting the offending detail, then permitting a reevaluation and restatement of the ensuing actions as if the whole fracas had never occurred.

Either of the above options, and others of course, may be perfectly reasonable in the event of actual error. But we gamemasters are a careful lot, as a rule. The experienced roleplayer knows the implicit premise behind the information: The situation is described from the viewpoint of the characters and is subject to their limitations. Instead of allowing the aforementioned debate, the gamemaster may simply say, “Why, yes, that does appear to conflict with the description.” And when a less-than-astute player insists on a more detailed explanation, the only response is an innocent smile on the face of the gamemaster.

The players must therefore trust the gamemaster implicitly in matters of verbal description. If a portion of that description is deliberately deceitful, whether as a result of GM whim for dramatic purposes or a game effect—a phantasm or misdirection implemented by adversaries—that deceit is then simply part of the game, a challenge to be surmounted by skillful analysis and play. In any event the gamemaster sits omniscient, whittling from the woodpile of information whatever modest splinter is deserved by the characters’ provincial limitations. The best the players can do is ask questions, to be sure of the few details that are available.

Don’t gloss over this one, ardent reader. It is the foundation of your very game, the bedrock tenet of faith in every roleplaying game. They have to trust you; it’s how the game is played. So eschew inaccuracy and remember that you’re all they have. From your omniscient perch, keep a careful watch for the misinterpretations that creep into any verbal conversation. Someday soon we’ll all be buying adventure modules on computer disk, the printable GM notes and graphics accompanied by an industry-standard visual imaging software package showing much of the adventure from the viewpoint of the characters. The process of visualizing a verbally described situation is a talent that some

# SECRETS FROM THE MASTERS



## LESSONS FROM THE MASTERS

have but some lack, and software will alleviate the burden greatly. Future roleplayers may marvel at our primitive 20th-century tools of mere words and imagination, but they are what we have for now, so use them wisely.

On the other hand, GMs are often deceitful with dice. When important matters are resolved by random selection, the cruel and unusual gamemaster makes the rolls openly, with no possibility of error or deceit. I may be unduly harsh in such a blanket categorization, and I'll quickly add that open rolls can suitably resolve many minor matters. But any game event having real impact on the plot should not be subject to such methods. Dice often contrast with our basic premise because devastating and dramatically undesirable random events, "realistic" and understandable as they may be, are oft antithetical to the goal of Everyone Having Fun. Many GMs thus keep their rolls private and announce results harmonious to the plot regardless of the actual rolls. Therefore, the players must again trust the gamemaster to judiciously heed or ignore randomizers and to bear the common purpose (Fun For All) firmly in mind when announcing such results.

Diceless systems arose a few years ago, but they perhaps overreached in placing too much trust on the overworked gamemaster. Situations arise when even a GM wants or needs to lay the blame on someone or something else, and dice are uncomplaining scapegoats for just plain bad luck. They are also useful in misdirection; the sound of a GM's dice at a crucial moment can send quivers through tense players, often more effectively than the most hideously described opponent, for obvious reasons: A specific foe or danger is at least a danger defined, while fear of the unknown has no such limit. As a final comment on dice and trust, one of the more useful tools in the current market is the *Fudge* dice system, the cubes marked with plus or minus instead of numbers, which cuts through the clutter and focuses on the real essence of randomizers—indicating fortunes rising or falling, or remaining static, leaving control of the quantification of that trend to the GM and the specific game mechanics in use.

Gamemasters are worthy of our sacred trust in more ways than we can count. We all seem to agree so I'll stop beating the horse. As the majority of you ardent readers are very probably gamemasters, I'm sure you will agree with this premise and move onward to con-

sider trusting your players, the people and their portrayals.

Hrmmm, I can hear the wheels turning out there—trust THEM? Hrmmm ....

## Trusting Players

We'll start easy. Bookkeeping is a chore, so do as little as possible. The record-keeping of the character's background, preferences, and experiences is usually the purview of the player. Certain statistics, equipment, special items, and the like are often the responsibility of the player as well but in some cases are kept by the gamemaster, and in some are handled by both.

If you're a real whiz at record-keeping maintenance, or if you simply enjoy the mass of data, then great—go for it, do as much as you like. But most of us lack the temperament and should thus hand off as much as possible to the players. It's certainly appropriate to keep track of valuable or unique items, though in most games they'll be used more as an aid for your reference in plotting and planning than as a cross-check on the trustworthiness of the players, but it serves the dual purpose as needed.

Next, trust them to portray their roles actively and in depth. This often requires a bit of education and interaction to accomplish, but it can be highly rewarding and often surprising. Remember that some folks have a talent for roleplaying but some do not, and sadly such talent does not automatically accompany a love of the game (though it helps). You as the GM should proactively address undeveloped roleplayers directly, encouraging their participation and stimulating their imagination with specific details and questions. In time they should respond in kind, adding to the enjoyment of everyone at the table.

Several good guides to developing and portraying characters are on the market, so I will not head down that long and many-branched road. But another question arises in passing—in your game, is the level of detail reached by common consent or by GM fiat? Just as we may enjoy a TV show from 10 feet away and find it intolerable at one inch, so can any roleplaying game quickly devolve into tedium if the level of minutiae is severe. Similarly, an overly broad and unspecific game is hard to treat seriously and often suffers from inaccuracy. Poll your players with some regular-

## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

ity and find out how much detail they find comfortable and preferable, and what compromises ought to be made.

Trust the players to help each other, of course. We all have assisted newer players in some mundane game mechanic—add these, roll that, it's in this book. Such simple actions echo our basic premise of Everyone Having Fun and reinforce the feelings of team cooperation on both personal and player levels. In the social context we enjoy the acceptance of others in our gaming group, and in the game context we often value their appreciation of our portrayals.

Experienced roleplayers may mature enough to be entrusted with the undeveloped roleplayer mentioned above. An advanced skill in the craft to be sure, this ability is usually characterized by an inquiry or statement offered as an invitation to respond. One player “sets up” the other, just as a “straight line” sets up a joke, and creates a situation ripe for roleplaying. Please note what this implies and reveals. The advanced player is secure in the ability to play the role. There is no need to hog the action, to reach out for an abundance of the GM's attention, to always be first to Do or Find. This player actively applies the basic rule and so helps others, fills an appropriate role, and reaches for the best that the roleplaying environment can offer. This player is worth trusting.

Surprisingly, such excellence of play can be cultivated, often quite easily when dealing with experienced hobby players. If you describe this admirable trait and specifically encourage it, perhaps even by offering rewards (in whatever denominations pertain to your choice of game system), and if you have the right group of players to work with, the results may be both rapid and ideal. Those selfsame players who have repeatedly demonstrated their avid pursuit of treasures and other rewards in remarkably greedy fashion may suddenly turn about, when properly educated and motivated, and join with you in creating a remarkably cooperative and entertaining game, both in the short session and the longer ongoing campaign.

Once again we are trusting the players to internalize that basic precept—Everyone Has Fun—and to place that goal above their personal ones. This is obviously a great demand and functions better as a habit than a rule. Time and practice will be needed to implement it thor-

oughly, and you must thus be patient and forgiving as you encourage this rewarding style of play.

Many years ago—heavens, it's been twenty years!—I was asked to create a club for fans of TSR's *Dungeons & Dragons* game. At the time I was a mere editor in the production rooms, but had showed enough promise (winning the GM's national competition, for one thing) to be offered this wonderful opportunity. The organization I designed, however, perplexed the upper management who had entrusted this to me, for in creating the Role Playing Game Association (RPGA) network I addressed the entire roleplaying hobby instead of just one game. The tournament structure I created demonstrated my trust in players by asking them to decide who the best players were, removing that weighty judgment from the shoulders of the gamemasters and tournament officials. To this day players conclude their tournament games by voting for the best players. In my original design I left this process unregulated, and many times we witnessed players of sterling quality vote with amazing honesty and rate others higher than themselves. This proved to be just a touch too optimistic for the long run, however, so the current system does not permit you to vote for yourself. The rest of the system remains unchanged even after two decades of field testing.

Imagine, though, the early days of competitive roleplaying and the shocked surprise when players found themselves entrusted with this task. We counted on the essential trustworthiness of people, and most of them have lived up to the challenge, placing teamwork and cooperation paramount even in the face of the rigorous demands of tournament play! Such examples certainly test our basic tenet to the extreme, and I believe that the results corroborate my premise. Remember this before you lapse into distrust when faced with the misbehaviors of the unenlightened.

We have been talking about hobbyists, fans of roleplaying who actively pursue and maintain it as a pastime of choice. Many players you encounter may be otherwise, including those who dabble in roleplaying as one of many modes of entertainment. The proliferation of the personal computer and the ensuing flood of simple and reactive software games, many labeled mistakenly as roleplaying, have degraded the perception of the value and potential of roleplaying. Those who have never experienced the exhilaration of true coop-

## POINTS FROM THE MASTERS

erative play and high-quality portrayal of roles are merely ignorant and can be educated; do not mistakenly categorize them as stupid. With similar reasoning, those who display a preference for treasure-grabbing or monster-hacking may be capable of far more. As gamemaster, you must open the door a crack and give them a peek at the vast potential offered by interactive in-person roleplaying. Trust them to appreciate that potential and develop it.

I trust that I've made some points to ponder. My premise is not universal; some players will remain greedy and provincial regardless of your attempts, and some will simply be incapable of appreciating the wealth of entertainment value afforded by cooperative roleplaying of high quality. Someday computer games will reach a level of interaction that approaches the innovation and imagination of the human player across the table. All things will change. For now, though, actively try to transcend your preconceptions and assumptions of the worst in people and hope for the best to emerge, with your help. One last time—keep that group goal in mind, Everybody Having Fun, and encourage your players to be mindful of it as well. They can surprise you. Give them a chance. *Homilium finis.*

## Treasure

by Steven Marsh

Copyright ©2002 by Steven Marsh

How much treasure should you give the heroes?

The flippant answer is: enough.

At the extremes, this is obvious. If they step on a banana slug and are presented with the Lost Treasure of Man-Cat-Du for their heroics, the players will grow justifiably giggly and bored. If they finally manage—against all odds—to defeat the Chaos Suneater Dragon and are rewarded with 17 coppers and a button, your players will kill you, and no jury would convict them.

But before the threshold for “enough” can be established, it's important to realize that treasure (and other rewards) has many different uses, both in and out of the game.

## The Many Uses of Treasure

### Treasure means being able to buy stuff

This one is fairly obvious—once you have a certain number of gold coins, you can buy that new weapon, armor, magic item, or whatever. You also use that money to replace things that were used up in the adventure. This typically means things like food, traveling gear, magic spell components, and other items.

### Treasure means being able to do stuff

Money can also be used to *do* things, like train to receive new skills, travel to new locations, and the like. Although fairly close to the first idea (and related in many ways), there *are* subtle differences. In general, “doing stuff” means new avenues that were closed before are now open, while “buying stuff” means things you could do before will now be easier. If the entire campaign takes place on an island, for example, then buying a new sword means you'll be able to fight things better on that island. Buying a boat means you'll be able to leave the island, presumably to go on to bigger and better adventures.

Of course, the two go hand in hand because often you'll need to buy more or better things to be able to do new stuff. If the next island over is populated by giant man-eating ferrets, you'll *need* a boat to get to them ... but you'll *want* a new sword.

### Treasure makes it possible to accomplish goals

If your goals are limited enough, this is the same as the first or second option. If all the character wants in life is to get a shiny new sword, then those first 10 gold pieces will make his dreams come true. But most characters have some sort of continuing goal which treasure can help make possible. For example, suppose our hero wants to own a fully operational castle; it's unlikely there will be one of those available at the bottom of the sinister dungeon, waiting to be picked up and taken home. But he may find enough money to purchase the land where the castle will sit. If so, he's one step closer to his goals.

Of course, treasure doesn't need to be a pile of coins. If our hero found a legal deed at the bottom of the dun-



## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

geon for a piece of land, then that's almost as good as finding the gold to buy the land itself. (In some ways it's better ....)

Likewise the acquisition of the treasure can be a goal unto itself. If you need to acquire the Sunstone Ruby or else the world will explode, then finding it in the bottom of the dungeon will make everyone happy. How much is the Sunstone Ruby worth? Who cares? If the heroes don't get to keep it, it could be worth 10 gold pieces or a million. The point is, it means saving the world.

### Treasure is a means of keeping score

Some players, consciously or otherwise, count treasure as a means of determining how well they are doing. To them, having a hero with \$5,000 is five times as good as having \$1,000. Having \$5,000,000 is a thousand times better than that. Having a +5 sword means you're doing better than all the folks who are stuck with +4 swords. Of course, they may not say it in so many words, but they're often recognizable by the glint in their eyes as they describe how much loot they have or what kinds of neat gear they've acquired.

This isn't a condemnation of these players. But a good GM will need to recognize these players and work either to please or dissuade their behavior. A nonscorekeeping character may be perfectly happy, for example, with a magic purse that generates 10 gold coins at sunrise; this would be the same as generating 3,650 gold coins per year. But a player who *does* keep score with treasure would probably prefer to simply receive 3,650 gold coins all at once.

### The Many Kinds of Treasure

Now that we know what treasure *does*, we can look more carefully at what treasure *is*. There are four kinds of treasure: monetary, material, nonmaterial, and personal rewards.

#### Monetary Rewards

In other words, cash. Or gold coins. Or cred chips. Or whatever society is using. They say it makes the world go round; that's true in both real and fantasy worlds (for the most part).

Monetary rewards are by far the easiest to give PCs. There isn't much need to think about the ramifications

of giving cash; while a GM may need to consider carefully what will happen if he gives a flying carpet to the party, there isn't as much need to wonder what they'll do with a hundred gold pieces.

Monetary rewards also cover things that are (generally) only useful as wealth, even if they aren't currency in and of themselves. For example, jewelry, precious gems, and valuable metals are all most useful as a source of wealth. While you could wear that lovely tiara and bludgeon a goblin to death with a gold ingot, those are probably better used as portable sources of cash.

Unfortunately, monetary rewards are, in the long run, probably the most unsatisfying, both for the players and the GM. Finding 3,000 gold pieces is *not* 150% as satisfying as finding 2,000.

Economics gives us the reason behind this, with the Law of Diminishing Returns. In a nutshell, it says that each item given satisfies less than the first. For example, let's say you're starving. You stagger into a diner, clutching your empty tummy, and sit in a booth. The server, sensing your hunger, immediately brings you a hamburger. You scarf it down and pause to catch your breath. The server brings over another hamburger. You're still a little hungry, but nowhere near as hungry as that first batch. So you eat that one at a more leisurely pace. After finishing, you're patting your belly ... and the server brings over another hamburger. This third meal is even less satisfying than the second one, which wasn't as satisfying as the first. Soon you don't really care if you *do* get another hamburger.

The same applies with treasure. When your beginning penniless adventurers defeat their first monster and get 20 gold for their troubles, it's *much* more satisfying than that second monster they defeat, which also has 20 gold. Why? Because in the first scenario the heroes went from having no money to having some; in the second they went from having some money to having some more.

What *is* exciting, then? An order of magnitude. In other words, lots more treasure than you had before. If your heroes start out without any money, then finding even a few coins will be a step in the right direction. Finding a sack of 10 gold after that will be just as exciting. Then so will winning a small box with 100 gold, followed by a treasure chest of 1,000 gold, followed by a pile of 10,000 gold, then by a tomb of treasure filled with 100,000 gold.

# ADVENTURES FROM THE MASTERS

The problem with this approach is obvious. Pretty soon you're giving your characters the moon made of solid gold, and they'll say, "What? Again? Add it to that gold meteor we found last week ...."

This presumes, naturally, that the heroes find a way to save or hoard their money. If you give them 100 gold when they're penniless and they find a way to spend that 100 gold immediately, then they're right back to square one; the next hundred they get will be as exciting as that first.

Unfortunately, getting heroes to spend money can be very difficult. The reason for this is that the cost of most basic living accessories—like food and clothes—is relatively linear in its progression. If good food costs a half gold a day, then one hero is only going to spend 183 gold in a year. No matter how mighty our hero gets, he'll only spend that amount of money. One treasure chest of 1,000 gold takes care of his eating needs for five years—with style! Likewise, once the heroes buy fine equipment (like weapons and armor), they probably won't need to buy it again; even if they do, those costs remain flat while the heroes' earning potential probably increases with their abilities.

(This presumes that the campaign's exotic gear, like cutting-edge technology or magical weapons, is unavailable for purchase. If the heroes can buy a +5 Sword of Butt-Kicking at the local blacksmith, there will still be interest in large sums of money—but it also means that such swords will be *much* less interesting.)

While enterprising GMs will find ways to part heroes from their money, by far the easier thing to do is to limit the amount of money they get in the first place. Yes, it's exciting for the heroes to earn the dragon's mounds of coins; it can also potentially open a can of worms, with ramifications far greater than the momentary glee the players experience from getting them.

These caveats are somewhat reduced with noncash monetary goods. While finding a diamond worth 1,000 gold may look the same as finding 1,000 gold by itself, the two are quite different. First, in the case of the diamond, how would you know what it was worth? Unless a character is a jeweler, miner, or someone else experienced in gemstones, he won't be able to tell off-hand. In this case, he will need to find an expert who

can price it; he might be swindled by an unscrupulous jeweler, or he might need to find someone else for a second opinion to make sure that first jeweler was honest. On top of that, someone who can appraise it will probably charge a fee. Second, a 1,000 gp diamond is not as dividable as 1,000 individual gold coins. If a hero tries to buy a meal at an inn with the diamond, he's going to be laughed at and thrown out on his ear; an innkeeper simply isn't going to keep 999 and a half gold coins on hand to make change. While the heroes could break such a diamond into smaller, more easily bartered pieces, the value will be greatly reduced. The sum of those pieces will be nowhere near 1,000 gp, since part of its value would be the unbroken mass. In all, even though a 1,000 gp diamond will be as exciting to the heroes (and players) as finding 1,000 gold pieces, a party will be lugging around that diamond a lot longer than straight cash.

On the other hand, noncash monetary goods *do* have their advantages. For one thing, they're generally much more portable. 1,000 gp would weigh 20 pounds, while a 1,000 gp gemstone would weigh almost nothing. They also tend to make much more

**“...trying to turn that diamond into a hot meal won't be any easier in a far-off land.”**

interesting bribes and gifts; giving the maiden queen a diamond brooch is far more romantic than forking over a sack of gold. Noncash monetary goods are also more easily convertible. If the game world is a place with many nations and currencies, then there won't be a standard coinage, and the exchange rates for money from place to place may be very expensive, if possible at all. Gems, jewelry, and treasures, on the other hand, should generally hold their value better from place to place, though, again, trying to turn that diamond into a hot meal won't be any easier in a far-off land.

## Material Rewards

Material rewards are physical objects that exist for reasons outside of simple wealth. Although they could be quite valuable, these treasures generally have some other purpose. Material rewards can include weapons, armors, trade goods, magic items, ships, manor houses, and a million other things.

Material rewards are exciting in a lot of ways. First, items of roughly comparable value can still be exciting

## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

and thus circumvent the Law of Diminishing Returns. For example, in the real world a home entertainment center has roughly the same value as a beautiful gown, but they count as two *very* different rewards in the eyes of most people. If a person had interest in both, then getting two items worth \$500 is a greater thrill than finding two sacks of \$500 each (or a single sack of \$500). If he doesn't have interest in both, then you've still given out items with a value of \$1,000, but you haven't created the problems that simply giving out \$1,000 does.

Material rewards also give the players things to think about. Who in the party is going to get the Aston Martin? Are they going to sell the potion of youth, keep it for trade, or use it? You've just given them a giant flying ship; what possibilities does this open for future adventures? In most players, having an object sparks the imagination more than a lump of equivalent cash.

It is also quite possible for the heroes to end up rich in material goods but poor in cash. If all you have is an expensive sports car, it won't directly help you eat or buy gear for your next mission. Nor will a Sword of Giant-Killing be of any use if you lack the means to travel to lands where the giants live.

Material rewards can also represent something *better* than cash. A Van Gogh original will be worth millions of dollars—but even if the PCs have millions of dollars, they probably wouldn't easily be able to buy such a painting, since one probably wouldn't be available. (Even if one were, it wouldn't be *that* one-of-a-kind Van Gogh.) Though these kinds of treasures don't easily represent real wealth—could the heroes *really* part with an original Leonardo di Vinci sketchbook, no matter how much it's worth?—they can be more rewarding. This is especially true in real-world campaigns—although you probably won't need to explain why finding Napoleon's sword is significant, you will need a fairly detailed campaign world to make finding the Lost Statue of Foobar have any sort of significance.

Many campaigns also lend themselves nicely to trophies as a treasure type. These can be any items directly tied to the adventure (ideally the climax or other significant plot point). If the heroes manage to keep the villain from using a giant brass ball from causing an earthquake, they then have a giant brass ball as a memento. It may (or may not) be worth anything, but it's a concrete reminder of a heroic deed; if the adven-

turers have any sort of base of operations, they can proudly put it on display. Pulp, superhero, and weird conspiracy campaigns all lend themselves to these sort of rewards. GMs will need to consider carefully what effect (if any) such items will have on the campaign; if the villain was going to use the Spear of Destiny to become all-powerful, there will need to be a good reason why the heroes won't do the same.

## Nonmaterial Rewards

Nonmaterial rewards are any treasure that doesn't exist in a physical form. The old man of the mountain may teach a long-dead language, or a magic word might be the reward for solving the sphinx's riddle.

A nonmaterial reward can exist in conjunction with a material reward. If the adventurers find a spell book belonging to a fallen wizard, they own the physical spell book as a material reward and the potential of learning new spells as a nonmaterial reward. Or the heroes might find 100 gold coins, each numbered sequentially and inscribed with a different letter. When read in order, these coins might spell out a message: T-H-E-H-I-D-D-E-N-M-A-G-I-C-S-W-O-R-D-I-S-L-O-C-A-T-E-D . . . . In this case, the location of the magic sword is an nonmaterial reward far greater than a mere 100 gold pieces. A truly devious GM might allow the heroes to find only 87 or so of the coins; the other thirteen were randomly taken by (or traded to) another monster. Of course, those thirteen coins will have vital letters for the secret message. When the heroes *do* catch up with that monster, they will be delighted to be rewarded with a mere 13 gold.

The possibility for nonmaterial rewards is limitless. In this way, a clever GM (and clever players) can also avoid the problems associated with the Law of Diminishing Returns; most such rewards have no direct monetary value, and they are almost always going to spark the imagination of the players.

Here are some examples:

- A favor (minor or major) from a king/president/corporate office
- A long-lost spell
- A glimpse into the future
- Increases in ability scores, skills, or other powers
- A special or otherwise difficult to acquire skill, lore, language, or the like

# BOONS FROM THE MASTER

An ancient rumor, treasure map, or other lead to further adventure

A boon, such that the next fatal blow the hero receives will instead fully heal the hero

A knighthood, doctorate, or other title of distinction

Free room and board in any chain of hotels around the world (or other far-reaching mundane reward)

Any interesting special power or ability, like darkvision, direction sense, or longevity

A song in tribute to the heroes and their deeds, popularized by bards or FM radio (as appropriate)

Transportation to any point in space and/or time, as appropriate to the campaign

A wish

Many players love nonmaterial rewards, because they often set their characters apart from others. Any character can accumulate a million gold pieces, but how many can say they're Knights in the Secret Order of Destiny? In modern settings, getting diplomatic immunity, the ability to pass through customs without inspection, or the right to carry a concealed weapon would set most characters apart from the general populace. And nonmaterial rewards don't take up any weight or space. If a hero is given a one-time touch that will act as a healing potion, that's better than a real potion: It can't be taken, lost, or destroyed, and it will always be available.

Nonmaterial rewards are also good for GMs; they're usually unique enough that they don't lead as easily to escalation (as do monetary rewards), and they can be more easily controlled. If the heroes save the Prime Minister's daughter and are given a favor from him as a reward, that favor is only good while he's in office. Likewise, if the adventurers are given knighthood in a secret society, that society might be destroyed or otherwise forced into hiding. Most players will resent having nonmaterial rewards taken away much less than similar material rewards. It's one thing to be cursed by the gods so that you can no longer use your flight ability; it's another to have goblins break into the camp at night and steal your Boots of Flight.

One of the challenges of nonmaterial rewards is to work them naturally into the campaign. After all, piles of loot can be lying around anywhere, but it's less obvious how a glimpse into the future might be found. In many campaigns, there are mundane reasons for many nonmaterial rewards—an ancient tome may give the

heroes an unknown feat or language if carefully studied. In fantasy campaigns, magic is a wonderful explanation—if the heroes thwart the archvillain before he can use an arcane device to bring darkness to the land, the eldritch energies that washed over the PCs from the exploded contraption may give them the ability to see in darkness. In science-fiction, superhero, or pulp games, science can provide the explanation—if the heroes were poisoned by a mad scientist and they defeat him, they may find that the antidote reacts with the toxins in their blood to permanently increase their strength. (Note that we say the serum reacts with the poison; this keeps players from using the antidote on nonpoisoned characters to raise their strength. If a “clever” PC tries poisoning an NPC in order to use the antidote, have the poison work too well and kill him. That should keep the heroes from trying to take advantage of a gift horse.)

Most often, outsiders bestow nonmaterial rewards. The heroes may defeat a powerful demon and are visited by avatars of good that grant a boon. They save the life of an airline president and are given free travel from that airline for life. They rescue the last teacher of a hidden monastery, and he trains the heroes in his near-lost martial art as a result. A GM can also use these gift-giving NPCs to spur further adventures in the future—the airline president may hire the heroes for another mission; the teacher may die and leave his academy to the PCs with the understanding that they will train a future generation.

## Personal Rewards

Personal rewards can be some of the most difficult to create, but when successful they can also be the most rewarding. These rewards are any that directly involve a character. They can be material or nonmaterial, although if material then the true value of the item is known only to a very small group of people. A music box might fetch a small sum of money from a pawnshop, but if that same box is a beloved childhood trinket, its value can be immeasurable.

Although in theory personal rewards can apply to any character (PC or NPC), in practice it is presumed that this category is reserved primarily for the heroes or for NPCs who are their associates. After all, a music box that has no significance to anyone else but Joe Schmoe might fetch a pretty penny from him, but if the

# SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

## An Alternate View of Money

Many campaigns don't have a need to keep track of specific monetary amounts the heroes have. After all, if the hero is a millionaire businessman in a pulp campaign, he *probably* has money for cab fare. He can also afford to send a gift basket to a helpful NPC, buy airline tickets, and generally spend "spare" cash. Likewise, most college students can afford to buy reasonable numbers of movie tickets, snacks, and other trivial items. And 20th-level thieves probably shouldn't need to dig into their coin purse to get a few coppers to buy drinks at the tavern.

If all players and the GM are agreeable, money can be handled abstractly. With this method, exact tallies of current cash/gold/credit reserves aren't kept track of, but rather relative levels of wealth are.

- Superb+** You have more money than you'll ever know what to do with. You can own islands, moons, kingdoms, or whatever unbelievable things the world has to offer.
- Superb** You're what people think of when they think "filthy rich." Anything "normal" the world provides is yours for the taking; almost anything exotic you would want is readily available. Lavish parties, extravagant luxuries, and bold undertakings are all well within your bankroll.
- Great** You're wealthy. You can buy pretty much whatever most "normal" folks would dream of buying, and even some exotic things. You could throw an annual gala ball, for example. Normal equipment is trivial to acquire, and even some exotic fare is available.
- Good** You're well off. You can afford all basic equipment the world has and can drop money (carefully) on luxuries for yourself, friends, gifts, bribes, etc.
- Fair** You're "middle class," as the world defines it. You generally never worry about meals and can afford high-quality fare every so often if you want. You can afford most standard equipment the world offers and most standard equipment appropriate to your profession.
- Mediocre** You're "lower class," as the world defines it. Your basic living accommodations aren't in question, though their quality might be. You can afford some minor luxuries but need to watch those expenditures fairly carefully. Poor weapons and armor would be affordable, as would replacement parts for these items (bullets, arrows, repair equipment).
- Poor** You're very poor. You can eat regularly and sleep at night, but that's the extent of the certainties involving your wealth. If you watch your finances you should be able to afford some lower-fare entertainment, like a movie or commoner play.

**Terrible** You're broke, or so close as not to make a difference. Eating regularly is a challenge, as is having a roof over your head at night. You have no luxuries or wealth to speak of, or if you do they're in a form unusable to you. (In many worlds a man without identification who looks like a bum would be unable to use a letter of credit, even if the money is genuinely owed him.)

With this system the GM would then determine where either individual PCs or the party as a whole fall. Most fantasy adventurers start out at Poor or Terrible; they might be sure they can afford dinner and a room at the inn that night, but that would be all that is certain.

When the heroes want to buy something, the GM assigns a wealth level of difficulty to the item in question. Food will generally be Poor or Terrible; equipment will usually be Poor through Fair, depending on what it is and how common. More expensive items like cars, horses, magic items, and the like will range from Good to Superb, again depending on the rarity and cost.

If an item costs two levels below the heroes' level of wealth, buying is automatic. A millionaire can buy all the movie tickets he wants. If an item costs one level below the heroes' level, they will be able to buy it unless there is a reason they wouldn't be able to. A millionaire can buy as many televisions as he wants, but they might run out at the electronics store. If an item costs the same as the heroes' level of wealth, it is at the limits of what they can afford. A Fair character could afford a Fair car, but only one in a long while, and then he would need to make appropriate skill rolls and arrangements with NPCs, as appropriate. If an item costs above the level of the hero, he cannot afford it at all without an adventure or other specific arrangement. Thus a Good character could not afford a gala ball at all, unless he could convince the caterer to do a favor, pull strings with the live musicians, and do a small task for the guy who owns the hotel. (These circumstances are also wonderful for using up those nonmaterial rewards, like favors.)

Heroes go down in wealth by spending too much money or by the circumstances of the plot. If the heroes have all their money invested in a tavern and it gets destroyed, they don't have those resources anymore. (The GM should probably avoid seemingly arbitrary and unsporting removal of wealth.) They can go up in level through adventuring and the GM's whim; in general, the "order of magnitude" mentioned in "Monetary Rewards" is a good guideline for considering whether to raise their wealth. If the heroes are at Fair wealth and manage to defeat the dragon and acquire his hoard, then they're probably at the Good level now, in addition to whatever nonmonetary goodies are there.

This system is completely optional and is designed for fast-paced adventures where the emphasis is more on what money can and cannot buy, rather than an exact accounting of pennies and nickels. Can the pulp archaeologist—a noted professor—afford the taxi ride to the Egyptology exhibit across town? Yes, he can, but he can't buy the taxi outright. Get on with the adventure.

# REWARDS FROM THE MASTER

heroes don't care about Joe then they won't care about his music box either. This type of "personal" reward isn't very different from trying to sell, say, a James Ensor original painting—except the size of the "James Ensor-loving" audience is much smaller than the size of the "Hey! I had a music box just like this one as a child!" audience.

By their very nature, little guidance can be given regarding personal rewards. In general they should either be related to goals the player wants to pursue for

that character or tied specifically to a hero and his background.

Some examples might include:

- A religious tome that applies only to a member of a specific order (such as one a PC belongs to)

- A pet or other animal a character has an interest in
- Information regarding any secrets or subplots a hero is pursuing (if a hero is suffering from lycanthropy, a clue that leads toward a cure might be reward enough)

- Any childhood mementos, especially if the hero had a traumatic or abbreviated childhood

- An offer for one character to join a secret society, order, or club

- Items (or people!) relating to any new subplots (a hero releases a damsel in distress, who then takes a liking to him)

Communication with your players is necessary to make personal treasures really work. For example, finding an injured hawk might be worth some coins to a falconer. But if a player expressed interest in a hawk as a magical familiar, suddenly that wounded animal becomes a small piece of wish fulfillment.

Personal rewards don't even need to tie directly to a PC. If a thief wants to break into an "unbreakable" vault just for the thrill, *any* trinket he escapes with from that vault assumes much more value than merely monetary. Or a hero wants to prove the existence of Atlantis. He may discover it but be forced to flee the doomed city (in typical heroic fashion); if he escapes with an Atlantean artifact, that object itself may be the proof he needs ... and thus sufficient reward.

Multiple people can share personal rewards. The party may want to expose the secret government conspiracy. Sure, that information probably has some value outside the heroes' circle, but it will definitely be more meaningful to them. Or the entire group could care about discovering the existence



## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

of Atlantis. Even then, ideally each character will have his own reasons for wanting to discover Atlantis—one may want to uncover Atlantean superscience to cure his illness, another may want an Atlantean weapon to bolster his own power, and another may simply want Atlantean gold. Of course, broader personal goals can be nurtured into something that can last many adventures, or even all campaign long.

Not all players will have an interest in personal rewards; some will stalwartly refuse any attempt to give them anything but coins, cool toys, and power. Presuming you enjoy roleplaying with them, this isn't a problem; simply remember that fact when deciding what treasure will be available. Other players don't have much interest in *non*-personal rewards. These players are often more interested in character development and roleplaying than accumulating stuff; fortunately, it's often easy to accommodate them.

Personal rewards, along with nonmaterial rewards, can be a good way to target a character that hasn't received much interesting treasure. The wizard of the party may well lose out to the warrior when it comes to magical weapons and armor; he certainly doesn't have use for most of them. But if the wizard discovers a spell that only he can use, or is invited to join the Secret Royal Order of Magical Protectors, this can balance rewards more equitably between the two.

## Putting It All Together

Now that you know what kinds of treasure there are, what does it all mean? In treasure, as in so many things, variety is the spice of life.

Which of the following is more exciting?

“You deliver a final triumphant blow, and the dragon falls over dead. Tallying the treasure, you find 16,532 gold pieces, 48,771 silver pieces, 1,422,721 copper pieces, a glowing sword, and a magic hat.”

Or

“You deliver a final triumphant blow, and the dragon falls over dead. At a cursory glance you see incredible treasures. There are small piles of coins everywhere—probably a thousand gold coins and a few thousand silver pieces, at least. Your eyes are also drawn to other items in the room. There is a hat that raises the hairs on your arms as you touch it; it's either powerful, or cursed. You also see an ornate throne—clearly not intended

for the dragon—that appears to be made of solid gold and the finest silks. As you ponder how you can possibly remove it from the dungeon, one of you discovers an ancient tome. Although difficult to decipher because it's written in a long-dead language, through the illustrations and diagrams you believe you now have some clues regarding the existence of a sword of great power. On the last page of the book is what appears to be a spell, written in the common language of magic. The wizard has never seen anything like it; with this he will probably be able to join the Artisan's Guild. And you are already pondering what you will make of the favor the Duke promised for vanquishing the beast ....”

Even though the former description details more actual monetary value in treasure, the latter is probably going to spark more imagination in the heroes ... and the players.

Don't be afraid to play with expectations and presumptions. Treasure is, ultimately, a reward for both the players and characters; once treasure becomes predictable and mundane, it stops being treasure. Most of us aren't terribly excited by finding lunch; eating every day around noon is presumed. Likewise, if the heroes grow to expect treasure each time they encounter someone—and a certain type of treasure at that—they'll view treasure the way we view lunch, and it probably won't be very interesting. If the heroes encounter ten ogres individually, and each one has 4d10x10 gold pieces, the heroes will grow bored. But if one ogre has 200 gold pieces; one has 400 gold pieces and a mysterious note that says “For services rendered”; one has no treasure but has a riddle answer that he will reveal (if the heroes let him live, of course); one is dragging a treasure chest with 1,000 platinum pieces; one is carrying a treasure chest filled with rice; one is carrying a talking rock; and so on ... suddenly the players will probably not be bored by encountering yet another ogre. After all, who knows *what* this one will have?

Don't feel obligated to use every type of treasure in each type of encounter; sometimes a pile of cash is good enough. By mixing up reward elements of all kinds, and keeping the possibilities and thrills of reward truly exciting, you'll ensure that your players are satisfied. Even if they can't figure out exactly what they're going to do with the solid gold throne, the giant brass ball, the map to the hidden throne, the password to the Cult of Power ....

# Campaign Troubleshooting

by Lester Smith

Copyright ©2002 by Lester Smith

A roleplaying campaign is an organic thing, not a mechanical construction. The gamemaster is more of a gardener than an architect, and players are more like exotic flowers (or sometimes weeds) than like guests at a theme park or visitors to a cinema.

The point of this contrast of analogies is that there is no way to blueprint a surefire success at building a campaign. On the other hand, there are certainly methods for nurturing one and encouraging it to bloom. That's why the gamemaster sections of roleplaying game books are heavy on advice rather than detailed instruction.

What those pages of advice typically do not address, however, is how to deal with the pests and diseases that may blight your campaign. The purpose of this essay, then, is to discuss a few of those issues. It assumes that you already have some idea of how to plant, water, and fertilize the seeds of adventure, but that you might not be prepared to defend the resulting sprouts from locusts that may come from time to time to plague your garden.

## Bad Seasons

Over the course of the past two and a half decades, I've had the good fortune to be involved in many different roleplaying campaigns, with many different groups of people, playing many different genres, and using many different sets of game rules. Some of these campaigns were incredible successes; others were dismal failures. Some lasted as much as three years of regular play; others fell apart after only a half-dozen sessions. In some I acted as gamemaster, and in others I played a character while someone else GMed.

During the first quarter of this period of time I was purely a hobbyist, gaming with my hometown friends. The rest of the time I spent as a professional game de-

signer, playing with old friends and new colleagues, and carefully analyzing what was working and what wasn't.

After this twenty-five years of intensive roleplaying, I have come to recognize that there's no way to predict what will be a success and what won't. Sometimes you can put the best roleplayers together, give them the best gamemaster, and let them play their choice of games, and the campaign still won't bloom. Even in the best circumstances, sometimes it feels as though you're just going through the motions. Strangely enough, at other times, even with inexperienced players and a subpar set of rules, a campaign will be so wonderful that its events seem almost reality.

The lesson here, I believe, is to "make hay while the sun shines." When a campaign is going great, enjoy it! Try to keep the momentum going. Don't let schedule conflicts cancel a regular session, if at all possible. Note what your players respond to with the most enjoyment and give them more of that. Save your experimentation for other times. (I killed one otherwise perfectly healthy campaign, for instance, by uprooting the player characters from the town they dwelt in and sending them

out into the world at large.) Pour your energy into the campaign, to keep it alive.

When a campaign is dying, however, don't fret overly much about it. Don't waste labor trying to revivify it if it's withering on the vine. Sometimes the time just isn't right for roleplaying. Other obligations may be interfering with your play-

ers' concentration on their characters. In such cases, let the land lie fallow for awhile, if need be. Generally, it's a good idea to keep scheduling *something* for a gaming session—board games, card games, etc.—just to keep your group together. This might even be a good time to experiment with short, unrelated adventures with different settings and game mechanics. Remember the real point is to have some fun; roleplaying is only a means to that end, not the end itself. If you give the campaign a rest, chances are that once the bad season has passed, your players will start to recall the enjoyment they had before, and soon enough you'll be asked to resurrect the campaign or start a new one.

**“Note what your players respond to with the most enjoyment and give them more of that. Save your experimentation for other times.”**



## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

## Bad Soils

Some plants grow best in loam; others need sandy soil. Similarly, not all people want to play the same sort of roleplaying campaign. For example, I have friends who love horror roleplaying and other friends who absolutely hate it. Some love science fiction, and it leaves others cold. Some like math-heavy game systems, and others want cinematic systems. Naturally, a campaign can't flourish if the setting and rules don't match the players' interests.

The secret here, of course, is to find out what settings your players like best and give that to them. Sometimes you can find a setting and system that spans these varied tastes and suits the campaign. At other times your only recourse is to assemble a different group of players. Perhaps you can run two campaigns at separate times: one for the horror roleplayers, for instance, and a second for the sci-fi fans. It can be interesting to adapt one adventure plot to the two different settings, in fact, and thereby decrease your own work somewhat.

Of course, as gamemaster you too are a player of sorts. So don't let your game group try to press you into running a campaign setting you have no interest in developing. That's a certain route to frustration, too.

## Bad Seeds

As they say, "One bad apple spoils the whole bunch." In terms of roleplaying, one bad player can ruin the campaign for everyone. Now in this case, by "bad player" I mean specifically the person who comes to the game only for his own enjoyment, typically at the expense of all others. This person may in all other ways be a great friend, but when it comes to the roleplaying campaign, such people simply can't or won't meld with the rest of the group.

As gamemaster, your options in a case like this are fairly limited. First you can take the player aside and try to explain how his behavior is disturbing the rest of the players and threatening the campaign. Initiating such a conversation can be difficult, but a good friend will accept it as concerned advice. If this doesn't work, however, you really have no choice but to exclude the offending person from your game sessions. Sometimes the only thing to do is show him to the door. A more

subtle approach is to "call an end" to the campaign, then contact everyone else later to resume at a different meeting place and time.

From painful past experience, I don't recommend trying to teach the offender a lesson by killing off his character. Such a player typically doesn't care that much about his character anyway, and he is sure to create and play another one just as outrageously as the first. He may well use his character to drag all the other players' characters to perdition along with him unless you intervene and manipulate events directly. In that case, if he does care about his character, your having singled out that character for special punishment certainly won't set well.

So remember, sometimes pruning is the only resort.

**"...sometimes pruning is the only resort."**

## Bad Gardeners

In the earliest days of roleplaying, no one really knew what it was all about—not even the designers. The first roleplaying games were really just specialized sessions of miniatures gaming, focusing on a few specific figures rather than whole armies. *Dungeons & Dragons* had its start when Dave Arneson pitched a set of fantasy miniatures rules to Tactical Studies Research group (later shortened to simply TSR—the game-publishing Ozymandius of the 1980's and 1990's, now relegated to an old WotC trademark folder in the basement vaults of Hasbro, Inc.). TSR's E. Gary Gygax led the ongoing development of those rules into something wider and richer than just miniatures, and when TSR started making millions as a result, a host of other companies followed suit with their own roleplaying settings and rules.

When those first boxed sets came out, however, they were pretty much devoid of any gamemastering instruction. Games aficionados would buy them, puzzle over what to do with them, and then start trying them out as best they could. Every gamemaster was a pioneer in those days, blazing trails through unfamiliar territory with nothing but a bad map (the rules sets) and a vague idea that there was fun to be had out there somewhere. It shouldn't be surprising, then, that lots of bad campaigns were scratched out of the raw soil of this wilderness of gaming.

# FOUNTS FROM THE MASTER

Since that time, the wilderness has been tamed somewhat. There have been some marvelous game systems published, with some excellent instruction for novice gamemasters. Game conventions, roleplaying magazines, and the Internet have helped to disseminate the best of those ideas and populate the world a bit more thickly with roleplayers than ever before. Gamemasters now have other GMs with whom to talk shop and share secrets. A certain level of quality now pervades the hobby.

Outside the boundaries of common practice, however, there remain a few holdovers from those early days. There are gamemasters who use a campaign as a lectern from which to show off their knowledge of a historical period. Others view gamemastering as a badge of office to justify their authority over their players. Far too many act as if the campaign is a puppet stage upon which to make their player characters dance.

As a player in such a campaign, you have advantages over garden flowers. First you can try to nurture your gamemaster in return. Let him know what you enjoy most in roleplaying. Help buy game materials that foster your sort of play. Compliment your gamemaster when you're having fun and complain (tactfully, of course) when you aren't.

If pressed, however, vote with your feet. Unlike a garden plant, you can always get up and leave, to seek ground more suitable to your desires. Remember, roleplaying should be a diversion from life's day-to-day stresses, not another one of them. So go where your fun and sense of camaraderie will flourish best.



# Running a Con Game

by Matt Forbeck

Copyright ©2002 by Matt Forbeck

Running a game at a convention is one of the most interesting challenges you'll ever face as a gamemaster. Instead of designing and running an adventure for friends you know—and who know you—you need to be prepared to handle a gaggle of strangers whose expectations you can't possibly be expected to know.

At a convention, you step out of your cozy living room and leave your house rules behind. You're in the real world now, and you're expected to put on a great performance, no matter what the conditions.

On the flip side of that coin, running a con game can be one of the easiest things you can do—if you know what you're doing. It ain't called a "con game" for nothin'.

Throughout this guide, I outline the kinds of things you should be doing if you want to be properly and entirely prepared for running a game at a convention. Then I'll let you know how to cheat. If you do it well—cheat, that is—no one will ever be the wiser. Those few who might won't care, because you cheat by playing to your strengths and to the strengths of your players, whatever they may be.

Just how that's true should become clear soon enough.

## Getting Involved

Why would anyone ever want to run a convention game? After all, when you go to a convention aren't you really there to play games instead of run them? Why would you want to bother to go and then have to handle the work end of the game?

The primary reason to run a con game is the same reason you do it at home: It's fun. Seriously. This should always be your reason to run a game. If you don't

think the game's going to be any fun, please don't run it. Your prophecy is bound to be self-fulfilling. And when you're running a game, you're not just going to ruin it for yourself, you'll ruin it for everyone.

Other good reasons to run a game are to introduce new players to a game that you love. This way, you hope, they'll go home and introduce more players to the game, and eventually this means that there are that many more people playing your favorite game at any given time. This improves the chances of the game being kept in print, and it means you can usually find people to play with, whether you're at a convention or not.

A mercenary but solid reason for running a game is that the judges (as the gamemasters are sometimes called at such events) often get into the convention for free. Think about it. You're providing a draw to get people to come to the convention and play games. The least the con managers should do is make it as easy on you as possible.

## Sign Up Early

Once you've decided you want to run a game at a convention, the next step is to let the con management staff in on your little plan. If you do this far enough in advance, they'll likely put this in the preregistration booklet, assuming they have one. This means that people planning to come to the show can sign up to play in your game in advance, which ups your chances of actually having a full game.

Some of the larger shows, like Origins and GenCon, have their deadlines for the prereg books up to six months before the show. This means you need to do



# CONVENTIONS FOR THE MASTER

some advance planning to make sure that you get the proper entry into the booklet.

Or you can cheat. The descriptions in these prereg books are usually only one or two sentences long. Come up with a generic title for your event—one that fits the general theme of the game is usually best—and then write something equally hard to pin down. Something like “The intrepid heroes must save the day once again!” is usually broad enough to cover just about anything you might come up with between the deadline and the day you actually run the game.

Face it—you’re never going to get enough into those two or three lines to smack someone in the face with the sheer brilliance of the encounter you have planned for them. So coming up with something generic that leaves you room to fudge later is fine.

One thing you should always try to state, though, is whether or not you’re willing to teach the rules to the game. Doing this can really slow things down if you’re actually looking for a thrilling game with experienced players. But when you’re busting out a not-so-popular game—or maybe even one of your own design—you’re going to have to do some teaching as well.

If you want to encourage beginners to join, write “Novices welcome. Rules will be taught.” If you want to deal only with wiser heads instead, try something like “Experienced players only please.” Either way, the best policy is to be as up-front with your potential players as you can. This helps to avoid nasty surprises for everyone when you actually sit down around the table.

## Know the Rules

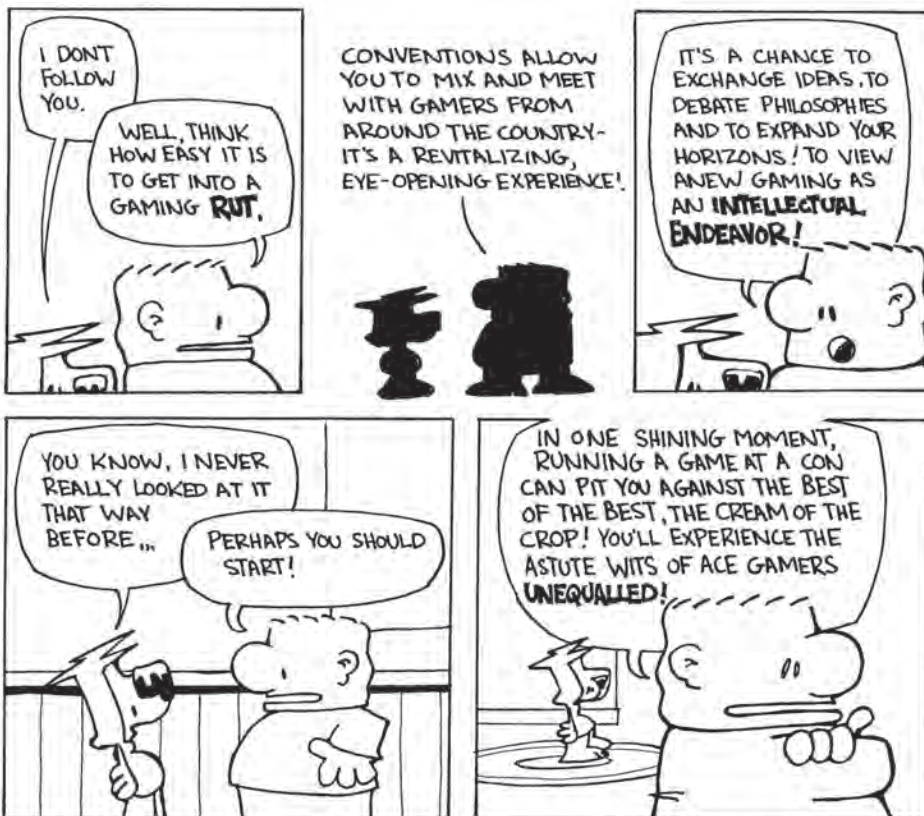
If you’re going to run a game at a con, be sure you’re as familiar with the rules as you can be. Honestly, as a player, there’s little more boring than watching your gamemaster flip through rulebooks or hastily scribbled notes. The entire game crawls to a halt, and attentions start to wander. Shortly, that stalwart team of adventurers dissolves into a bunch of people staring at each other around a table. The players want to feel like they’re in the hands of someone who knows what she’s doing. In this case, that someone is you.

The corollary to this is to not let the players send you packing for a book. If they come up with some obscure rule that you’re not familiar with, you have two choices. The first is the easiest and most efficient:

Rule the way you want to and then move on. As the gamemaster, you’re in charge, not the nitpickers.

On the other hand, some nitpickers have a point, and if it’s really going to change the outcome of the game, you might want to check the rules. This is especially true if you’re running an event that’s part of a tournament. Those players are competing against other players in other games, and they deserve a level playing field, after all.

If that’s the case, ask the nitpicker to look up the rule for you. In fact, if you’re not all that familiar with the rules—for whatever reason—this is the perfect way to cheat. Pick out someone in



# SECRETS FROM THE MASTERS



## TIPS FROM THE MASTERS

the group who knows the game better than you and ask him to help you out. Do this publicly, and make a point of letting the player know how much you appreciate the assistance. By doing this, you turn a potentially embarrassing situation around. You get the help you need, the players get the smooth-running game they deserve, and your helper gets a bit of an ego boost by proving himself useful. Everyone comes out ahead.

## Get the Adventure

If you're running the adventure for a company, be sure to get it at least a few weeks before the convention if you can. Then, if you have time, try running the game with your friends at home. This way you can make sure you have the whole thing down pat, and you can shake out any bugs that might crop up.

If you discover some real problems, be sure to report these to the company. If you're just reading something wrong, they can let you know. If you really have uncovered a serious problem, the company can share it with any other gamemasters running the game, before they get snagged by it themselves.

If the adventure features certain aspects of the game you're not too familiar with—say it uses a group of spells or a certain kind of monster you've never used in a game before—now's the time to do your homework. Read over those unused sections of your rulebooks. Break out the highlighter and the Post-Its if you have to. Just make sure you're covering any areas in which you feel you might be weak.

Now, not every game company is so together as to be able to get the adventure to you before the show. If that's the case, try to track down your contact at the company and get the adventure as soon as you show up at the conventions. Even having five minutes to skim through the text before a game can help. If you're really short on time, most convention coordinators are happy to give you a verbal rundown of the adventure too—if they can.

One thing you want to make sure you have at the show is character sheets for the players. Most of the time these are pregenerated characters, heroes that have already been designed for them. Most con games are only four hours long—some even less—and if you spend the first hour creating your characters, you're not going to have much time to play.

## Roll Your Own

If you're creating your own adventure, there are the top 10 things you should keep in mind.

### 1. Keep It Short

Again, the time slots for most roleplaying games are only four hours long, and you're usually supposed to wrap up 15 minutes early so you can clear out before the next group comes along.

### 2. Keep It Simple

This is not the time to dust off that megacampaign you've been working on for years, just aching to try it out on some fresh meat—um—players. Keep the plotlines to a minimum. One works best, although you can fit in a second if you like. There's a good reason to stick with the single plotline, though.

### 3. Make the Heroes

Some con games allow the players to bring their own characters to the game. That's fine when you're working with experienced players, but it's a path full of pitfalls. First of all, someone is bound to forget to bring anything. Secondly, how are you going to make sure that these characters fit together as a team, one that's capable of or even interested in taking on the challenges you set before them? If you want to play it safe, make up the characters yourself and hand them to the players when they sit down. This also allows you to tailor the characters to your plot, making the game that much more seamless.

### 4. Don't Split the Party

Even in a game you run at home, splitting up the party is a bad idea. During a con game, it can be suicide. Instead of having to deal with one group of heroes, you're now having to juggle two or three. While you're playing with one group, the others are sitting around watching. Roleplaying is not a spectator sport. Sometimes the group is going to split up on its own. That's fine; you can't help that. Don't help it happen.

### 5. Keep It Loose

Be as flexible about your plotline as you can. Play-

## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

ers hate to feel like they're being railroaded, and they often do things you can't possibly predict. If you think it's hard second-guessing your players at home, imagine how insane it is to try to do that with a group of people you haven't even met before.

## 6. Make the Goal Clear

Don't force the heroes to wander around for an hour or two before they figure out what it is they're supposed to be doing. Get them into the action quickly and then go, go, go! Time is short, and these people came here to have some fun!

## 7. Give Everyone Something to Do

If you've given your players certain kinds of heroes to play, set the adventure up to make use of each of them. No one likes feeling like a fifth wheel. A total combat zone adventure is going to make the slicker types feel a bit useless. Similarly, a game of high intrigue is going to leave the tough guys doing little more than sharpening their knives. Make everyone feel like his hero is an integral and important part to solving the challenge you've set before the group.

## 8. Keep the Fights to a Minimum

There's nothing that brings most games to a grinding halt like a fight. A battle that might only take a few minutes in game time can take hours at the table. This isn't a miniatures game you're running. The players expect to be able to do some roleplaying. Let them.

## 9. Start Off with a Bang

Once the players have had some time to get into their characters and introduce them to each other, throw them into the situation right away. If you give the players too much time to poke around, they're bound to get bored and start messing with things that have nothing to do with the adventure at hand. Don't let them stray too far. Hit them with the plot hook as soon as you can.

## 10. End with a Bang

Many con games end in a fight of some sort. If you've managed to pace everything out right, the heroes end up facing off against the villain in the final scene, and most villains aren't the type to put out their wrists for

the cuffs and go quietly. Anticipate this by figuring that you want to start the final combat about two and a half hours into the game. This gives you a full hour plus some cushion time in which to resolve the combat, plus some time for an epilog at the end.

Once the adventure is written, take it and playtest it with your friends. Do what you can to work the bugs out of it and patch over the glaring plot holes. Honestly, it's a lot better to be caught in front of your friends than a group of strangers who have placed their trust in you.

## Come Prepared

Get to your game site early and scout it out. In fact, if you're going to be running several events at a convention, register early and then go and find each of the places well ahead of time. There is little that annoys players more than showing up for a game that the gamemaster somehow misses. Second place behind that is having you show up late. If you already know where you're going, you're that much ahead of the game before it even starts.

Before you leave for the game site, be sure you're packed and ready. Check to make sure you have copies of the core rulebooks of the game with you, plus any others that you might specifically need for this adventure. Be sure that you have a copy of the adventure with you, along with enough adventure sheets for all of the players. You might even want to bring along some extra sheets just in case. Sometimes people show up with friends, and adding one or two more people to the game is rarely too much trouble.

Also, make sure you have dice with you, and make sure they're of the right kind. Bring extras if you can, since many players often forget to bring any of their own.

If you somehow mess up on bringing your dice, don't be shy about asking to borrow some from the players. They're usually happy to oblige.

If no one at the table has the right kind of dice, you can cheat. You can simulate a d20 with a d10 and any other die, for instance. Just roll the d10 normally. If the other die roll is high (over half its highest number), add +10 to the d10 roll. Otherwise, leave it alone. Similarly, you can use a d8 to fake a d4 by simply dividing

## TIPS FROM THE MASTERS

the result in half, rounding up. A d10 makes a fine d8 if you just reroll any 9's and 10's.

If you really bone it up and can't find any dice at all, there's the old standby: chits. Take a piece of paper or some counter and write the numbers from 1 to whatever on them. Drop them all in a cup, and when you need a die roll, draw from the cup instead.

Of course, drawing chits really slows things down. After a game of doing that, you'll be thanking the people who came up with all those funny-shaped dice. And you probably won't forget your dice again any time soon.

Take care of personal business before you step up to the table. As the gamemaster, you can call a break in the game anytime you like, but you only want to do so when it's dramatically appropriate. Remember, time is short here, and you can't afford to waste any of it. So be sure to eat ahead of time. Scarfing down a bad con dog in the middle of a game can make it hard for you to tell the players what's going on. Also, hit the bathroom beforehand. Like your mom always said before starting off on a long car trip, it's now or never.

Since you're going to be talking a lot during the game, you should take care of your voice. Bring a bottle of water with you if you can. Some cons even provide water in the game rooms, so you can replenish your supply whenever you need too.

If you're going to be playing a lot of games over the course of a weekend, be sure to bring along some cough drops as well. Otherwise, you might end up kissing your voice good-bye before the end of the first day. At the bigger shows especially, you're going to be shouting for hours at a time over the background noise of literally thousands of people doing the same thing. This can be brutal on anyone's vocal cords after a while. The mentholated drops seem to work best for this. Fisherman's Friend cough drops are the tops, although they taste like mentholated cardboard.

## Work the Crowd

One of the biggest problems in a con game is making sure that everyone's having a great time. When you're playing a game at home, you're usually among friends, and everyone at least knows each other. At a con, there's a fair chance that not a single person at the table has ever met anyone else at the table.

This opens up all sorts of potential problems, not the least of which is personality clashes. That's not to say that the players may actually end up at each other's throats in the course of the adventure, although that's certainly a possibility. Worse than that, though, is that a few of the players might dominate the gameplay to such an extent that the less aggressive players actually feel shut out of the whole event.

As the GM, you actually have a great deal of control over this situation. If you notice one of the players fading into the background, focus on his character for a moment instead. Put the spotlight on him and don't let him back away. No one comes to a roleplaying game to sit quietly the entire time. Give each player his own chance to shine.

In all but the most serious games, it's okay to crack a joke once in a while. You're not practicing your stand-up routine; you're there to run a game. But humor can help break the ice and get people feeling good about the game.

## Follow Your Imagination

When something happens in the game that you didn't expect, let your imagination run wild. If a player botches a roll, think of what the worst possible thing that could happen to the character might be—and then let it happen.

These are players. They have their own imaginations. You don't have to solve their problems for them. Your job is to make sure they have challenges that are worthy of their ambitions.

Follow the players' imaginations too. If a player wants to try something entirely outrageous, let him go for it. As long as it's within the spirit of the game, this kind of thing only adds to the drama. The players want to see their heroes out there on the edge, taking the kinds of chances they must to have a shot at their goals. If they wanted to play things safe, they'd stick to real life. Harness their imaginations and let them help drive the game along.

## Watch the Clock

While you're running the game, be sure to keep an eye on the time. It's best to carry a watch or some other kind of timepiece for this purpose, since constantly asking people what time it is can jar them out of the game at a crucial moment.



## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

Time gets more important as it gets shorter, as you get closer to the end of a game. There's little more frustrating to a group of players than to get to the end of an adventure and find that they don't have the time to complete it.

You can help prevent this by keeping an eye on the pacing as you go along. If you get through the first hour of the game and the heroes aren't even a quarter of the way along, you need to pick up the pace a bit.

If the heroes are stuck in the final battle and don't seem to be getting anywhere as time runs out, this is the perfect time for the villain to hear the ticking of the clock too. Have him make some last-second, mad dash at victory, the kind of do-or-die thing you might expect from the most reckless hero. This way, no matter what happens, the game should end on time, and the players can feel some sense of resolution about it.

## Don't Cry over Spilled Blood

This is a convention adventure. The players have little or no emotional connection to their characters. They are just there to have a good time.

This means that you don't have to hold back or give them a second chance like you might have at home. If a couple of the players feel compelled to leap headlong into a situation that spells certain death in big, block letters 40 feet high, let them. And let the dice—and the characters—fall where they may.

Just because a character dies doesn't mean the player has to leave. He can stick around to see what happens. If you like, you can even give him a chance to play the part of an NPC or a monster in the game. Maybe he can join the heroes as one of the minor characters you had them run into earlier in the game. Don't worry about the fact that you probably don't have a character sheet for that newly appointed hero. Just tell the player to roll dice when he has to, and you'll tell him if the character succeeds or not.

## Let the Heroes Lose

The next logical step, of course, is to let the heroes lose. This is not an ongoing campaign. It's not the kind of episodic television in which you know the main characters are never going to die because the actors still have contracts. It's more like a movie, a self-contained tale in which just about anything can happen.

While most people like happy endings, this is a game. That means the outcome is never entirely certain. If it was, what would be the point of playing?

The trick, of course, is to make the players feel as if they had a chance. It's not fair to just tie the heroes to the tracks and let the train run them over. The players showed up and played. Their heroes deserve the chance to go out in a blaze of glory at least. If they actually manage to put an end to the villain's plans as they shuffle off this mortal coil, then at least they died gloriously and meaningfully. Considering that the players will likely never get a chance to play these particular characters again, that's not such a poor way to end their relationship with each other.

## Winging It

If worse comes to worst, if you absolutely are entirely unprepared, don't panic. There's always hope.

A good gamemaster can make the worst adventure fly, while a bad one can suck the fun straight out of the finest adventures ever. It's really up to you and your ability to be able to snatch fun from the jaws of boredom.

Consider this first. The game is only going to be about four hours long. Trim 15 minutes off the end just to begin with. Give the players at least 15 minutes to choose characters and get themselves organized. Figure you can end a little earlier if you like. This means you only have to keep the players going for just over three hours.

Honestly, it's not that hard.

In fact, if you're an experienced gamemaster, you can keep a group of players entertained for that long playing a game you don't know all that well and that you don't really have an adventure ready for. It's simple.

You let the players do the work for you.

All you really need is an adventure hook to get things going. Let's say that the heroes are hired to take a crate from Point A to Point B. Start with that, present it to the players, and see what they do with it. Most of the time, the players will take enough initiative to get the ball rolling on their own.

As the heroes ask questions and start poking around, come up with answers to their questions on the fly. The players are sure to instantly come up with their own theories about what's really going on behind the appar-

# ADVICE FROM THE MASTERS

ently simple and innocent façade you've put in front of them. Since at this point you're not sure how things are going to end, maybe one of the players is actually right—or at least close enough to keep the players interested and allow you to spring a surprise of some sort on them when they least expect it.

Now, some GMs may be outraged at the suggestion that you simply go into the game with a thin plot outlined on the back of a mug-ringed cocktail napkin. In some ways, though, this is actually the best possible way to run a con game. (The “con” in this case is letting the players think you know what's going on.)

The old adage that applies here is “Give them what they want.” By allowing the players to take an active if at least partially unknowing role in developing the story, you are giving them the chance to get exactly that. If that's what it takes to entertain them for three or four hours, what's the problem? Think about it. You're getting that old plot-driven railroad out of the way straight off. Since there's no plotline to ram the heroes along, the whole experience can feel a lot less forced.

If a player catches you winging it, just grin sheepishly and own up to it. As long as you keep it entertaining, they usually don't mind that you can't exactly remember the full name of that bartender they met in the opening scene.

Sometimes it helps to scribble down notes as you go along, just so that you can remember the things you've told the players. A lot of information is generated in the course of a roleplaying session, and it's easy for even the best gamemasters to lose track of things—even when she has a full manuscript for the adventure in front of her.

Once you've admitted to what you're doing, though, don't stop there. Keep rolling along. Just because the adventure wasn't written down months ago doesn't mean it's not good. It's just being tested on the fly.

In fact, this can be an even more liberating experience, since you can feel free to ask the players help keep track of the details you toss out at them. Some players have the most amazing memories and are sure to catch you in any inconsistencies. Don't fight that. Co-opt these players into helping you out and make use of their attention to the details you're generating for them.

## Relax

The key thing when running any game is to relax and have fun. If you're nervous, it's going to show. Worse yet, it can rub off on the players.

At conventions, most players are gracious and polite. They know (or hope) that you took the time to set up an adventure to entertain a bunch of total strangers with, and they generally appreciate that. They know you're not getting paid for your efforts, and they usually understand that the success of the game rides as much on their shoulders as your own.

So take a deep breath and then jump right on in. Be yourself. Be determined to enjoy the experience, and the players will too.

If you go to enough conventions, you might be surprised how often you run into the same people year after year, especially if you run the same kinds of events. These are people with whom you share something deeply: a love of games. These aren't just a bunch of strangers you're going to meet and never see again. For that four hours, at least, they're your compatriots and even your friends. And who couldn't use another friend?

## Gamemastering for Kids

by Sam Chupp

Copyright ©2002 by Sam Chupp

Kids need to play roleplaying games. Not only do they help broaden the imagination and improve self-esteem, they also encourage problem-solving skills, critical thinking skills, and pure learning in mythology, religion, literature, geography, math, history, and many other areas. As gamers get older, children are sometimes seen as the inevitable next step. Think back to when you were young: Wouldn't it have been cool to grow up in a houseful of gamers? How would it have been to have a parent or other important adult as your GM?

Now you have your chance to provide that kind of life for your kids, or your nieces and nephews, or the kid down the block, or the kids you babysit every Friday night. Many children who are 7 or older can play

## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

RPG's, so look around you. Which kid could you bring into the hobby?

If you are a kid reading this to become a GM, know this: Gamemastering roleplaying games is a difficult, complex, and highly demanding task. It requires you to be a generalist, a jack-of-all-trades. Everybody who tries it deserves a pat on the back, and very few, if any, are good at it the first few times they try it. Be gentle with yourself; don't get discouraged if you aren't perfect the first time out. Your players (if they are good players) will recognize your effort and assist you in providing them a good time.

Every gamemaster does things differently. My methods and suggestions are just one way to handle GMing. There are many other styles and techniques, and if you disagree with me, I encourage you to write your own article about this topic and post it on the Internet where gamers gather. We all need many different perspectives in this, our gamemastering art.

Aside from my 26 years running roleplaying games in general, I've been running them for kids for three years now on a regular basis, with lots of hours of gaming with 7–13-year-olds under my belt.

## A Special Note for Adults

When you're running a game for kids, you have to understand and remember what it is like to be a kid: Children are essentially little people who are at the mercy of forces in their lives. If they're lucky they have positive forces in their lives who help make them feel secure, comfortable, and who give them enough personal choices to help them feel as if they have some control over who they are. Still, to be a kid means to be at the mercy of the will of adults. It takes practice for children to overcome this mindset in a roleplaying game, to go from being reactive, not especially empowered individuals to active, dynamic, powerful characters who set their own courses and follow their own destinies.

In my opinion, public school and television do not typically encourage critical thinking and personal ini-

tiative, so this could be one reason why it's hard to get kids kick-started into self-motivation. Another reason may be that many kids have become used to being led around in games and stories. Even video games that are open-ended have few true decisions to be made. Those games which are complex enough to allow the player to dictate his own path still have places in the virtual landscape you cannot go and actions you cannot take. It's a fundamental design characteristic of a video game.

**“...to be a kid means to be at the mercy of the will of adults. It takes practice for children to overcome this mindset in a roleplaying game...”**

Kids who are old enough to play RPG's should be old enough to make open-ended decisions in an open-ended game. They should practice thinking critically, solving problems, and working through difficul-

ties. This is the time when they tend to learn the skills that help make them into effective adults. So my advice to you is to help the kids you play with learn to make their own decisions by encouraging them to think before they act and to roll with the punches when they make a mistake.

Of course, you may also encounter children on the other end of the spectrum, those who are perfectly capable of taking action, making decisions ... and hogging the spotlight. Kids who are outgoing and not at all shy will frequently try to take over the game from the shyer kids. You have a responsibility as a gamemaster to balance your attention between the squeaky wheels and the not-so-squeaky ones. I'll talk more about this later under “Facilitation.”

## What to Play?

One of the most important questions to ask about running RPG's for kids is, “What game do we play?” Those of you lucky enough to live near a well stocked game store will be quite surprised at the sheer number of roleplaying games available. A casual search on the Internet reveals a number of electronically published games available as well. With so many games to choose from, how do you go about making the choice of which game to run for kids?

# ADVICE FROM THE MASTERS

## Important Characteristics

You may not be able to choose a game easily, but most people don't even get a choice. They're offered a chance to play with an established gaming group and the choice of game has already been made for them. I submit that you will be better off choosing, learning, and running a game on your own if you wish to referee a game for children.

The six most important characteristics for a roleplaying game for children are value, access, appropriateness, simplicity, kid appeal, and game balance.

## Value

It is important to pick a game that is not overly expensive and provides good value. A game that requires you to buy \$100 worth of books may not be the best game for kids to get started with! Remember, many kids' parents are not gamers, they are just regular folks who can't understand why a big hardbound book costs \$30. If a kid is paying for a game out of his own allowance, you don't want him to have to shell out a great deal of money just to play!

There are also plenty of free games available on the Internet, which allow you to try a game before you spend any money. This is a good idea for people who are worried about cost and who have never run a game before.

## Access

The game should be universally available. Once a kid starts playing, he will be asking for accessories for the game for holidays and birthday presents.

Kids like the idea that other kids like them may be playing the same game all around the world. Even adults can recognize the game they're playing and discuss it with them. They will very much enjoy going to conventions, when and if that happens, and playing their games with others.

## Appropriate for Children

It is hard to make an objective choice for what game is "appropriate" for kids. Think about the concerns of the parents first. Do your players' parents worry about violence? The occult? It is important to take all this into consideration. Some parents may be okay with a game set in the modern day but not with a fantasy world, while others are exactly the opposite.

Read the rulebooks' credits pages! Many of the *World of Darkness* games published by White Wolf, for example, are expressly not appropriate for children, and they say this on their credit pages.

Any game can conceivably be purchased and "toned down" for kids. How you run the game can make a big difference. For example, White Wolf's *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* game could be run for kids: It has a nice environmental message and the characters have a lot of nifty powers that kids might like. You will have to tone down or eliminate the toxic demon foulness, evisceration, and disembowelment aspects of the game.

*Vampire: The Masquerade*, on the other hand, is a game that directly involves personal horror. There's no way to get around the blood-drinking aspect, and blood-drinking is definitely not a kid activity. You could play it, perhaps, with teens who can

**“Think about the concerns of the parents first. Do your players’ parents worry about violence? The occult? It is important to take all this into consideration.”**

see PG-13 or R-rated movies, but not 7–12-year-olds!

“Reforming” a made-for-adults game can backfire, especially if parents purchase the game independently, get a load of the graphics in the book, and yank the kid out of the game!

## Simplicity

Obviously games that are less complicated are better for children. Although I do not think that kids cannot handle complex games, their learning curve has to be shallower and longer.

Remember, simple does not mean stupid or “easy.” A simple roleplaying game can still provide many thousands of hours of entertainment.

I call the rules of a roleplaying game the “technical”

# SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

side of the game, and the story elements and narration and characters and setting the “narrative” side of the game. A game can be very well developed and rich on the narrative side and very, very simple on the technical side.

Choose a game that is simple on the technical side. The fewer rules that a child has to learn, the better, especially for a first gaming experience.

## Appeal

It is hard to describe kid appeal, but it is very important. If a game does not strike a child as having an interesting, fun concept, the game will have very low kid appeal.

You must already have in mind a group of kids to play with. Talk to the children about what they like. Do they prefer super-hero stories, or science fiction? Do they like unicorns, or would they prefer giant robot warriors? Would they like to play in the everyday world, a fantasy world, or a world from the future or the far past? Try to find out what books they’ve read, what movies they love, what TV shows they enjoy. This will help tell you what they may be interested in.

It will help if the game you have selected has lots of interesting illustrations, but the single most important selling point to kids is power. As I said before, children spend their lives in a relatively powerless state, with adults all around them exercising power over them. They love to fantasize about being powerful, of having magical powers that let them fly or turn invisible, or be victorious over their enemies.

One thing to avoid is the games where kids must play childish characters. I have never made my kids play children in their games. Even the RPG I specifically created for children has the characters starting play as 15-year-olds. This is because kids always fantasize themselves as quasi-adults, or at least teenagers. They may still act like children, but their characters must be over 18, or at least over 12, to be interesting to them.

**“It will help if the game you have selected has lots of interesting illustrations, but the single most important selling point to kids is power.”**

## Game Balance

The idea of game balance is that a roleplaying game should be fair. Life is not fair, as I am fond of telling my children, but games should be fair. It is never a good experience when game balance is disturbed. Characters who become ultrapowerful quickly steal focus from the entire group.

Game designers are divided about the idea of game balance. Some people think it is important for a game to be balanced at the design level. Others say that it is the GM’s responsibility to keep the players from becoming too powerful too quickly.

Some games are just too unbalanced, too open-ended at the start, and you have to be careful playing them. The one that comes to mind immediately is a game called *Amber Diceless Roleplaying Game*. This game has you begin play as a godlike being, and you do not use dice or any other “technical” mechanic to decide the outcome of conflicts.. I don’t believe this game would provide good roleplaying for children. Kids tend to take things and run with them once they warm up to the game, and you will soon have nothing but mass chaos on your hands. If you’ve ever heard the classic argument, “I got you!”, “No you didn’t!”, “Yes I did!”, you will understand.

## Recommendations

There are several games I would say have all of the above desirable characteristics:

### Dungeons & Dragons® 3rd Edition (D&D® 3E)

*D&D 3E* is an excellent game for children. It is universally available, relatively inexpensive, technically simple, and a well balanced, fascinating fantasy roleplaying game.

This edition of *D&D* is quite accessible. Not only is everything based around a single die mechanic for conflict resolution, but the *Player’s Handbook* (a primary game book) comes with a CD-ROM to help generate player characters, so kids who are used to playing computer games will feel right at home.

# ADVENTURES FROM THE MASTERS

There is a wealth of “narrative” content available, including canned adventures for beginning GMs to use with the game, many of which are free on the Internet. There are two major magazines, *Dragon* and *Dungeon*, to support those who play. There is a national organization, the RPGA, which supports a network of gamers. At nearly every fantasy, science fiction, or gaming convention you will find people playing *D&D* 3E.

One barrier to entry with *D&D* 3E is that your kids will need some kind of token or figure to represent their characters on a map. Although you can technically play without these tokens, the game is more visually interesting and flows much better when you do.

Also, it is a game set in a fantasy universe that almost requires magic, monsters, and the like. If your kids want to play a science-fiction game, you may not wish to play *D&D* 3E. Wizards of the Coast, the company which makes *D&D* 3E, has also published the *Star Wars Roleplaying Game*, which uses many of the same attributes and dice-rolling conventions as *D&D* 3E. This means kids who are already comfortable with *D&D* 3E can easily switch to playing *Star Wars*, as they are both part of the d20 System.

## GURPS®

*GURPS* is the *Generic Universal Roleplaying System* published by Steve Jackson Games. There are a lot of settings available for *GURPS*, and the great thing is that all of them can be used interchangeably. If you want to play a time-traveling dragon hunter with a robot sidekick and an Old West sharpshooter companion, you can. If you want to play a historical reenactment of Civil War America, you can do it. Want to recreate the bunnies from *Watership Down*? No problem! Of course, every other roleplaying game in existence can be altered any way you want. *GURPS* is just the only game that provides predesigned, prewritten rules for all these genres.

Accessibility is very high because Steve Jackson Games offers a free rule pack called *GURPS Light*, available online.

One big downside of *GURPS* is that it is more complex, character-generation-wise, but an adult familiar with the rules can assist players in creating their characters. Once the characters are created, the game runs extremely well.

## Fudge

*Fudge* is a very nice system, and the best thing about it is that it’s absolutely free. It’s highly intuitive and very easy to learn. As such, it does not require a great deal of time to get involved and start roleplaying. Character generation is simple and quick. The game mechanics are minimal. This is the ultimate “narrative side”

system. The technical side almost doesn’t exist! Many *Fudge*-related supplements exist, but the main system is free and available online.

The only downside to *Fudge* is that not a lot of people have heard of it, and sometimes the lack

of much of a technical framework for rules can cause wildly fluctuating game balance issues.

**“...children should not glory in gore. They should not cheapen life by seeing it as something that is worthless and easily spent. At the same time, as a parent I want to remind them that their actions have consequences.”**

## Conflict

One way to make sure your kid gamers get their regular dose of gaming vitamins is to ensure that there is a healthy and vibrant plot to your games. Conflict drives the plot. It is the engine that keeps the whole story moving. Without conflict, instead of *Dungeons & Dragons*, you might as well play *Bunnies & Clouds*.

Violence can be part of the conflict, and this may upset and worry parents. The whole issue of violence and children is a very big one with many different perspectives.

Since I am myself a parent, I have had to make choices as to what part violence should or should not play in my children’s lives and especially in their entertainment. I feel that my children should not glory in gore. They should not cheapen life by seeing it as something that is worthless and easily spent. At the same

# SECRETS FROM THE MASTERS

time, as a parent I want to remind them that their actions have consequences.

So I make certain that, when I describe their attacking orcs in *D&D* 3E, they understand that these are *beings* they are fighting, not mindless machines—creatures with families, with reasons for what they are doing. Just like they have.

I will not allow in-game, in-character cruelty to take place. There are fights, yes, but nine times out of ten these are situations that could not be solved through some other means. I teach my kids that violence is only one option to solve problems, and rarely is it the best option. My scenarios reflect that fact, and my kids know that if they run into a creature, even if it drips with evil, they should spend some time talking to it, rather than just randomly launching some silly attack. Kids who are arbitrary about their characters getting into fights will frequently find themselves outclassed and defeated in a very short period of time. I don't let kids be cruel, either.

In my games, karma works. That is to say, what you do comes back to you. If you are nice to someone and save his life, frequently something nice will happen to you. If you are selfish, or shortsighted, greedy, or mean, you will find the world turning on you. That's just how it works.

There are many different kinds of conflict. Not every story should have the player characters fighting other people or monsters. Some stories can be about the PCs overcoming terrific odds to survive in the wilderness, solving arcane puzzles and deciphering what a lost civilization intended for them to do. Perhaps they find themselves in a situation where the only way to succeed is to play the detective, sleuthing around and gathering clues.

In general, these policies tend to make the games more upbeat and positive as well, which is also important. You don't want little Chelsea's statement to her parents to be, "Yeah, we killed all these goblins, and then cut their ears off! It was cool! Then we killed a bunch of ogres and then we set fire to them! Neat, huh?"

## Heroes

Every story has its heroes, and you don't want the players to think they are the only good guys around. One reason for this is that kids tend to be discouraged rather early in the beginning of their roleplaying careers, and they need to feel as though they're occasionally doing something right.

In order to use heroic NPCs with kids properly, you have to understand that kids are usually not as good at roleplaying as most adults. They rarely have the skills at imitation, voice control, and facial expression that a veteran gamer has, and because of this you're going to have to tone your performance down or simply cope with the fact that your expression of acting ability is going to simultaneously charm and intimidate your young gaming charges.

Kids frequently have the urge with an adult playing an NPC to put that NPC into a parental role. You have to establish the sympathetic character as being "not a parent figure" as soon as possible.

I noticed this trend with my heroic NPCs. If there was a choice to be made, all of the players would turn to my NPC and say, "What should we do?" So I started creating heroes who weren't perfect, had a lot of flaws, and didn't give very good advice, or were quite biased one way or another.

One of the most successful examples of this for me is a character called Tash Oakbin. Tash is a rogue and he is very much my own personal "vicarious" NPC. For a while, the kids always asked Tash to figure out things for them, and Tash would always respond, "I don't know, Lady Miria, what do you think?" Lady Miria, a dwarven fighter, is one of my partner's daughter's characters. Katie was told when we introduced Tash that Miria had saved Tash's life at one point, and he feels he owes his life to her and will defer to her in every circumstance.

Now Katie is a pretty safe kid to put this on, because she wouldn't let Miria think of lording it over ol' Tash (and really, Tash wouldn't put up with much ordering around). Every time Tash defers to Miria, Miria rolls her eyes and plays along. She isn't quite comfortable with her role as Tash's liegwoman, but she likes Tash.

Tash is pretty knowledgeable about some things, and

**“Every story has its heroes,  
and you don’t want the  
players to think they are the  
only good guys around.”**

# QUESTIONS FROM THE MASTERS

on those things he can play the expert. Because he's a "scout" (that is to say, a rogue, but he won't admit to being a rogue), he pays special attention to what he calls "operational security"—that is, staying aware of possible threats to the group. Because of this, the kids have come to count on him as a watcher of sorts. They've also started to emulate him and always "check the exits" and keep watch around their group whenever they're in potentially dangerous situations.

Make your heroes into role models for the kids, but don't do it in a preachy way. Simply make them nifty-cool and model for them the kind of behavior you'd like to see their characters show. Kids always sense when they're being preached at. This is roleplaying, not the after-school special.

## Player Characters

Of course, the most important characters in the story are the ones your players create for themselves, the player characters. If a kid is not enjoying the character he is playing, he's never going to enjoy the game as a whole.

How do you help a child find out what sort of character he wants? Asking open-ended questions will help you get more of an idea about what the child will find interesting. Here are some questions you can ask a child to help determine what he may wish to play:

1. What kind of things do you see your character doing?
2. What sort of approach would you take toward a bully? Would you want to fight him, trick him, or tell on him?
3. Would you like your character to work out in front where everyone knows what he is doing, or behind the scenes, in secret?
4. Have you read the rules about spells or powers? Do you mind learning everything your character can do with all of his spells or powers?
5. What sort of heroes or heroines do you have? What do you like about them? Would you like to be like them?
6. What is your favorite movie character?
7. What books do you like to read?
8. Would you rather be big and strong, or small and quick? Why?
9. Which is more important, smarts or quick thinking? Why?

10. What movie star would play your character if this were a movie?

When my daughter Genevieve first started playing, she was very difficult to keep focused. It took a lot of work and effort on my part to keep her attention. This was because the character she had chosen to play, a cleric, was too complicated for her, and Genevieve is primarily a social player. When I streamlined things and gave her what was essentially a gamemaster's character, a played NPC in the form of a faerie dragon, she suddenly became much, much more interested in playing.

She could participate in any given game session or not, and the other players were okay with that. She didn't have to remember her spells or do anything specific, but when she wanted to join in and have fun she could. This was the ideal PC for a social player: a character who was small, portable, and could move quickly from place to place, to keep up with the action and stay near the spotlight. Today, however, Genevieve has graduated to playing a cleric again; her faerie dragon character is now her cleric's special magic friend.

## Journaling

During the course of any RPG, the players will from time to time feel it necessary to bring up courses of action they'd like to pursue that are totally boring to the other players. My son Rowan, for example, read an article in *Dragon* on alchemy. The next game, he wanted to have his gnome wizard take weeks off to use his alchemy skill and create all manner of nifty alchemical items. Of course, the other PCs didn't feel like hanging around for weeks waiting for their new gnome alchemist to finish his experiments! This was a good time for journaling.

Journaling is a process where a player can write about his PC's activities between game sessions. The player gets a chance to cover ground that he would normally not get to in the context of a normal session. He can also use a journal entry to tell about the character's past. Journals are useful to flesh out the character further.

It is very difficult to get kids to write anything about anything, especially if it's not part of their education. I offer experience points to any child who can turn in a reasonably well written character journal entry. Even if it is written on the back of a hamburger wrapper and is in crayon! At least it's writing!



## SECRETS FROM THE MASTER

## Social Issues

Another big point about gamemastering for kids is to understand the purely social issues surrounding kids and roleplaying. Roleplaying is still not a mainstream hobby, and I doubt it ever will be. It takes a lot more work to get into than, say, a video game or a movie. It takes a lot more time than most sports do. It's not something that is very easily explained or understood.

However, recent events in popular culture (especially for fantasy and science fiction) have made roleplaying more acceptable now than it has ever been. When mainstream movies show wizards and orcs, sorcerers and witches in a positive light, this is a very good time to be a roleplayer.

As a result, parents who are also gamers don't have to be as worried as their parents were about them and how they may be perceived. There is nothing wrong with roleplaying games for entertainment, but there are still many who believe otherwise. There is no other way to teach them differently than simply to be a gamer, enjoy RPG's, and teach others who wish to learn about them. Sooner or later, people will either see that everything is pretty much just good clean fun, or they will continue their narrow-minded beliefs. This is okay. We know what we like.

Still, one issue a lot of parents who are gamers have is, "Should I introduce this game to my son or daughter's friends?" They envision a scene where they call up some young prospective gamer's parent, only to have a father or mother scream at them and chitter something about blood, cults, and demons before slamming down the phone.

In my experience, this has never happened. Only once or twice have I been gently turned down from a parent when I've asked if it would be okay if their child play a RPG with us (usually it is accompanied by a perfectly reasonable excuse). I of course always honor a parent's wishes. Frequently, however, other parents are frankly amazed that I, a grown-up, would want to spend four to six hours with their kid and his friend, my son or daughter.

Why would I *want* to subject myself to that? Well, I do this as a kind of an advocacy, and also because it is fun. I like having something in common with my children and their friends. We all share a common world, a common language. It definitely makes everything a lot

easier when it comes time to talk with my children about other, more difficult topics.

But other parents are amazed that I would be essentially willing to "babysit" their child for four to six hours on a weekend. To some families, it is a boon beyond price. They get free babysitting and they get to go out and have "adult time," sometimes for the first time in months.

So don't be shy. Ask your child's friend to game with you, and ask his parent if it's okay first. Answer any and all questions openly and completely, and be honest. Make sure that basic rules of safety are followed during the game and that everybody's needs are taken care of. It is important to provide a decent, clean environment in which to play, especially since many other parents have no idea what goes on during these games.

## Facilitation

It's important for GMs of kids to remember that children all have different attention spans and they all have different levels of social skills. Sitting for hours in one place doing the same thing, no matter how engrossing, can be very difficult for kids. It is important to take scheduled breaks, to make sure the kids have food and drinks on hand, to make sure they get some fresh air and get up and move around and stretch. Frequently, when I have a large group of kids gaming, we go outside and run around for a bit before the game, and then take the dog on walks during breaks. When we get back inside and start playing, I notice that they're quite a lot more calm and focused on the game.

Here are some typical problem kid gamer archetypes and how best to facilitate them:

### Bashful Gamer

The Bashful Gamer is shy, and takes a long time to warm up, if ever. They attend game after game and never say a word aside from the minimum absolutely necessary. As a GM, you can help the Bashful Gamer by providing them a special role to play in the group. Give them an important piece of the puzzle, or an important connection to the plot. Make sure they have a character they like. If they retreat even further after this kind of attention, it may be that they are primarily a social gamer who is shy and reticent. Relax and let them "enjoy the ride." Do not be overbearing in forcing them to partici-

## LEARNING FROM THE MASTERS

pate, simply have patience and continue to offer them opportunities to interact. Either they'll eventually come out of their shell, or they will stop attending games. On the other hand, it is important that this person's character not become the central focus of a game, as the other players will get very frustrated and increase the social stress the Bashful Gamer may be feeling.

### Spotlight Gamer

This is a kid who always has to be front-and-center, in the spotlight. Frequently this kid will start barking orders to the other gamers during the game, or they are one of the better roleplayers in the group and therefore take the lead every time interaction is needed. The Spotlight Gamer always wants to have his or her way and hogs a lot of the attention of the GM by rules lawyering, over-acting, or acting out. The Spotlight Gamer can really tick you off if you're not careful.

Remember to stay calm when dealing with kids: if they sense you are reacting out of emotion rather than reason, they will enjoy "pushing your buttons." What you need to do with the Spotlihter is to recruit another child (preferably a kid you trust) to be the Caller for the group. The Caller will help take all the ideas for further action and keep the flow of the game moving. Whenever the Spotlight Gamer talks about going off the plot, taking over, and heading off in some other direction, simply turn to your Caller and say, "Is that what the party is doing?" Having to go through another kid is one way to reduce the attempts by the Spotlight Gamer to get more attention.

Also, you may be able to arrange it so that the Spotlight Gamer is treated like a specialist. Perhaps in combat scenes, the other players will agree to let the Spotlight Gamer lead the combat. Or if the group isn't particularly good at puzzles, the Spotlight Gamer will be called in as a special puzzle solver. It is important that you speak directly to the Spotlight Gamer and let them know that if they wish to get your attention, they'll wait their turn and share the focus with other players.

### Disruptive Gamer

One gamer that might look like a Spotlight Gamer is actually a Disruptive Gamer. The Disruptive Gamer isn't actually interested in playing an RPG, he or she just wants to disrupt activities and cause trouble in gen-

eral. There are not many kids like this, and most of them have other problems than just a need for attention. But it is important to notice when a child

gamer is apparently just attending the game in order to cause trouble and kick up a fuss. This kind of gamer can really destroy a good time for the other players.

If you have a Disrupter, you owe it to your serious players to give the Disrupter what I call "an invitation to the world." You don't need to make a scene with their parents, simply do not invite them back for the next game session. If they or their parents ask, let them know that you are perfectly willing to allow them back into your game after they've proven to you (in perhaps another social venue) they can not be as disruptive.

How do you tell a Spotlihter from a Disrupter? A Spotlihter will generally calm down after they realize they're not going to get anywhere with you by trying to hog the spotlight. A Disrupter will continue on disrupting, even after you speak with them multiple times about their behavior.

### Non-Reader Gamer

This gamer doesn't know how to read, doesn't like to read, or can't read well. This makes it difficult for the Non-Reader to play characters that have a lot of different powers or abilities, which require reading the rulebook. You can take one of two strategies in this case: either have them create (or help them create) special "flash cards" to assist the player in learning what their powers are and best utilize those powers, or restrict the player to characters which do not have a wide range of powers, just a single useful ability in one specific area.

As a GM, you should encourage the Non-Reader to learn how to read and be patient when they try to read something. Offer to help them learn their powers before or after the scheduled game time. Once again, make certain that the Non-Reader has a character he or she really likes: this will help give them motivation to learn.

### Conclusion

Running games for kids is not just a entertainment, it's also an investment in the future of gaming as a whole. Remember, you aren't just playing games with kids, you're teaching a whole new generation of roleplayers and giving them the motivation to keep the faith and spread the word.

# CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

## Aaron Rosenberg



Aaron Rosenberg was born in New Jersey and raised in New Orleans, and is now in New York. He has been gaming for twenty-two years, running games for twenty, and working in the game industry for eight. In that time, Aaron has de-

signed three games (*Asylum*, *Spookshow*, and *Chosen*), codesigned four more (including the original *HKAT!*), and done freelance writing for such companies as White Wolf, West End, Last Unicorn, and Pinnacle. Aaron has also written essays on gaming for *Pyramid*, RPGNet, and *Games Unplugged*. In his spare time he runs his own game company (Clockworks, online at <http://www.clockworksgames.com>), does corporate graphics, writes novels, and plays with his two cats.

## Sam Chupp



Sam Chupp is a 34 year old dad who lives in the Atlanta area with his family: his partner, Cynthia, her daughter Katie (11), and his two children Rowan (13) and Genevieve (10). Everyone who lives in his house plays RPGs. In 1993 & 94,

Sam was a co-designer of the roleplaying games *Changeling: The Dreaming* and *Wraith: the Oblivion* for White Wolf Game Studio. He has written many articles on kids & roleplaying for the website About.Com. In Summer, 2000, he ran a special roleplaying camp for children at the Omega Institute for Holistic Studies' family week. He runs an email list for people who want to run roleplaying games for kids called kids-rpg. For more information about kids & RPGs, see his website:

<http://www.samchupp.com/kids-rpg/>

## Hilary Doda



Hilary Doda got her start in the gaming industry at Canadian company Dream Pod 9, and has recently entered the glamorous world of freelancing. She is a passionate gender-equity activist, and has spent a great deal of time and irreplaceable forest

resources writing and speaking about the topic in various fora. She grew up in the concrete wilderness of Toronto, escaping to Montreal about five years ago, where she shares living quarters with the feline embodiment of Chaos. She would like to thank her muse and fiance, Richard Morris, for his endless and unwavering support in all her endeavours.

## Ann Dupuis



Ann Dupuis has been involved in the game industry since 1990, as writer, editor, cartographer, and publisher. While writing *GURPS Old West* (her first big roleplaying project), she discovered that American history is actually interesting, a fact that escaped her while in school.

Ann is the founder and president of Grey Ghost Press, Inc. Her favorite game systems are *Dungeons & Dragons* (the *Rules Cyclopedia* version) and *Fudge*. She decided to publish *Fudge* commercially when she realized that it was the perfect game system for the "Animal Companions" gaming sourcebook she's been working on for more than a decade. Alas, other projects keep distracting her from the Animal Companions book, including her own animal companions (two dogs, three cats, and two Arabian horses).

Ann lives in Massachusetts with her husband Paul, thousands of books, and hundreds of games. They plan to some day have their very own Hundred Acre Wood.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

## Lee Gold

Lee Gold has been reading SF since she was in junior high back in the 1950s. She got into science fiction fandom back in 1967, when she was in grad school getting an MA in English Lit. She's also interested in Arthurian and general Celtic folklore, Norse folklore, Japanese folklore and the Japanese language, Judaica, Kipling, Cabell, and reading random articles in the Britannica.

She publishes *Alarums and Excursions*, a monthly RPG APA that began back in 1975 and has won a couple of Origins Awards (and is up for the Hall of Fame). She's also written some professional game products including *Lands of Adventure*, *GURPS Japan*, and *Vikings* (for Iron Crown Enterprises). She also writes filksongs and publishes *Xenofilkia*, a bimonthly magazine of filk songs.

For more information, see <http://theStarport.com/xeno/leegold.html>

## Kenneth Hite



Kenneth Hite has been roleplaying since the summer of 1979, and GMing almost continuously since that October. He has written GMing advice (among other things) in the *Star Trek Next Generation RPG Narrator's Toolkit*, both the Decipher and Last

Unicorn *Star Trek Roleplaying Game*, *GURPS Cabal*, the third edition of *GURPS Horror*, the D20 version of *Call of Cthulhu*, the *Cainite Heresy* and *Guide to the Camarilla* for White Wolf, *Nightmares f Mine*, and in the two collections of his "Suppressed Transmission" column for *Pyramid* magazine. He does his research on other topics besides GMing advice at the Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago, the largest openstacks research library in North America. On rainy days, he sticks to the several thousand books that share his house with his (extremely tolerant) wife, Sheila.

## Matthew Forbeck



Matt Forbeck has been working full-time in the adventure gaming industry for more than a decade, ever since he graduated from the University of Michigan. In that time, he's worked with most of the leading companies in the industry, including Wizards of the Coast, Games Workshop, White Wolf, Pinnacle Entertainment Group,

Alderac Entertainment Group, Artbox Entertainment, Image Comics, WildStorm Productions, and many others. He has worked on collectible card games, roleplaying games, miniatures games, boardgames, and even written some short fiction and a comic book or two. He lives in Beloit, Wisconsin, with his lovely and brilliant wife, Ann Kolinsky, and their handsome and wonderful son, Martin. They've recently welcomed quadruplets into their family!

## Larry D. Hols

Larry D. Hols began gaming by becoming a DM on two days' notice. Since that trial by fire, he's played with and pattered with an unending stream of games and genres. He can be described as a ruthless GM, but prefers to be viewed as Just Plain Mean.

## John Kovalic



*USA Today* called John Kovalic a "Hot Pick." His political cartoons appeared in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and his *Dork Tower* comic book was launched in June 1998. "*Dork Tower* may just be the perfect comic book," raved Diamond Comics Distributors, the world's

largest book distributor.

The *Dork Tower* comic strip now runs three times a week at Dorktower.com, as well as in *Dragon Magazine*, *Pyramid* online, *Scrye*, *Games Magazine* and the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Dork Tower is officially translated and published in Germany, Italy, France, Brazil and Spain. John's other creations include *Newbies*, *Wild Life*, *Beached*, and many other features, including *Murphy's Rules*, *The Unspeakable Oaf* and *Help Wanted*, and he's working with Nickelodeon on developing an animated series.

If you ask him nicely, he'll tell you how he helped create *Games Magazine's* 1999 Party Game of the Year, the best-selling, award-winning *Apples to Apples*, or how he once ended up in the pages of the *National Enquirer*.

In his spare time, John searches for spare time.

## Steven S. Long



Steven S. Long is a writer and game designer living in Greensboro, North Carolina. He has designed and written over 70 roleplaying game products, including work for Gold Rush Games, Hero Games, Iron Crown Enterprises, Last Unicorn Games, Pinnacle Entertainment

Group, Steve Jackson Games, White Wolf Game Studios, Wizards of the Coast, and others.

His work has received numerous *Origins Award* nominations. In December 2001, Steve and several partners formed a company, DOJ, Inc., and purchased the assets of Hero Games. Steve now works as *HERO System* Line Developer for Hero Games, a job he's long dreamed of having.

Prior to embarking on a full-time writing career, he practiced law. Steve is a graduate of Duke University and Duke University School of Law. Go Blue Devils!

## Steven Marsh



Steven Marsh's love for gaming started in 1985, when he was introduced to *Dungeons & Dragons* by his Social Studies teacher. While attending Florida State University, he worked at a comic and game shop, resulting in a truly frightening collection of both. He graduated from FSU in 1995 with a degree in Creative Writing.

His break in the creative aspect of gaming came in 1997, when a letter he wrote (while at work) to *Shadis Magazine* detailing his theoretical "perfect" issue was turned into the "Special Steven Marsh Issue." He wrote a couple of articles for *Shadis* before that publication disappeared. In 2000 he became the editor of *Pyramid Magazine*, Steve Jackson Games' weekly online roleplaying publication, where his column "Random Thought Table" and infrequent articles keep him writing. During his reign *Pyramid* has received two *Origins Award* nominations, and became the first electronic publication to win that award in 2000.

Steven estimates he owns well over 100 RPG systems, and has GMed or played in about fifty. His biggest pet peeve is being called "Steve." He lives physically in Tallahassee, Florida and virtually at [www.waitingforgo.com](http://www.waitingforgo.com).

## Frank Mentzer

Before he took up gaming as a career, Frank Mentzer was a professional musician. He performed nationwide, and even did a concert at the White House. TSR hired him in 1980. Frank edited and authored several central products (the *D&D* boxed sets, from the Basic through the Immortal rules among them), as well as many adventures for *D&D* and *AD&D* (*The Temple of Elemental Evil* with Gary Gygax, RPGA tournament adventures, and more). He is the founder of the Role Playing Game Association (RPGA). Frank has been onstage as the Lead Auctioneer at the *Origins*<sup>TM</sup> and *GenCon*<sup>®</sup> game conventions for almost 20 years. These days, he manages "The Baker's House," a pioneer of all-natural baking, in the Wisconsin North Woods.

## John Nephew



John Nephew has been a freelancer in the roleplaying game industry since the mid-1980's. His credits cover a wide range: author, editor, cartographer, photographer, graphic designer, layout artist, proofreader, and publisher. He wrote several books for TSR, including co-authoring the *Complete Thief's Handbook* for AD&D and writing several adventure modules and sourcebooks for the D&D world of *Mystara*.

John is the president of Atlas Games, which has been publishing games since 1990. Atlas Games' roleplaying game lines include *Ars Magica*, *Feng Shui*, *Unknown Armies*, *Over the Edge*, *Rune*, and the *Penumbra* line of *d20* adventures.

## John R. Phythyon, Jr.



John R. Phythyon, Jr. has been writing professionally in the Hobby Game Industry since 1996. He has contributed to a wide variety of lines including *Legend of the Five Rings*, *Deadlands*, *Big Eyes Small Mouth*, *Hong Kong Action Theater!*, and *d20*. He won an *Origins Award* for his design work on *The Sailor Moon Collectible Card Game* in 2000. He also writes a monthly column, "Playing to Win," for *Comics & Games Retailer*.

Presently, he is the RPG Line Manager for Avalanche Press, serves on the Game Manufacturer Association's Board of Directors, and Chairs the Academy of Adventure Game Arts & Design. He lives in Lawrence, Kansas, with his wife, Jennifer, and his dog, Brittany.

## Jean Rabe



Jean Rabe is the author of 11 fantasy novels, including the hardcover *DragonLance Dhamon* trilogy: *Downfall*, *Betrayal and Redemption*; the *Dragons of a New Age* Trilogy; and *The Silver Stair*. In addition, she's written nearly 30 short stories in the *Forgotten Realms*, *DragonLance*, *Star Wars*, and *BattleTech* settings and for DAW Books.

Jean worked as a newspaper reporter and news bureau chief before learning she preferred writing fiction to covering the grisly crimes committed in the Midwest.

In her spare time she edits (*Sol's Children* and *Historical Hauntings* for DAW), pretends to garden, and buys more books than she can possibly read or hope to fit on her bookshelves. She is a member of SFWA, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America.

## Janice Sellers

Janice Sellers was born in Los Angeles, California and has lived in California, Australia, and Florida. She started gaming in 1978 with white-box *Dungeons and Dragons*. Janice started working in the game industry in 1990 at Chessex Manufacturing. After four years there, as the Assistant Production Manager and the entire Roleplaying Department, she realized a long-held dream and escaped to Chaosium, where she worked for three years editing and developing the *Call of Cthulhu* role-playing game and fiction lines and the *Pendragon* fiction line.

She currently does freelance editing, indexing, and translation for many fine game companies. She has edited thirteen products (games, fiction, and a CCG) that have won *Origins Awards*, and has won two *Origins Awards* as an editor. She has a Bachelor degree in foreign languages (French, Spanish, and Russian) from USC, which has had only a small application in the game industry, to the eternal regret of her mother.

## Mark Simmons

Mark Simmons is a professional archaeologist and museum educator, currently excavating in the medieval town of Hartlepool on the northeast coast of England. He has been gamemastering for some 20 years, but has failed to persuade any of his pets over this time not to chew his vital GM notes just before the climactic scene of the scenario.

## Lester Smith



Lester Smith wants it all. But realizing he can't have it all, this Origins-award-winning designer of *Dragon Dice*, *Dark Conspiracy*, and much more has made some accommodations in his life.

Recently, one of those accommodations was to leave the relative paucity of salaried game design and take a full-time position outside the hobby industry—as the e-Publishing Director for an educational firm—in order to better feed his rather large family and honor his very large student loan payments.

Then—as an accommodation to this very accommodation!—Les partnered with Timothy Brown and James M. Ward to start Fast Forward Entertainment, so as to continue publishing games. You can learn more about Les at [www.lester.smith.net](http://www.lester.smith.net) and discover Fast Forward's current and upcoming projects at [www.fastforwardgames.com](http://www.fastforwardgames.com).

## James M. Ward

Jim currently works toward making his own game company ([fastforwardgames.com](http://fastforwardgames.com)) grow and prosper in 'gods country' Wisconsin. His biggest claims to fame are his three genetically perfect sons and his charming wife who have been conned into staying with him for over 31 years.

A short list of his gaming credits include the first science fiction role playing game *Metamorphosis Alpha* (just released again in a 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition), several original role playing concepts and products, two

unusually successful CCGs, and a batch of novels he's quite proud of writing. TSR and he put up with each other for slightly over 20 years. Several other game companies decided after awhile they didn't like him very much so he started his own game company (making him lots harder to get rid of).

He loves gaming and reading science fiction and fantasy novels. He doesn't quite know everything about gaming, but what he doesn't know would only fill ten or twelve CDs. He tries to play games every Friday night at the local hobby store. He manages to play poker once a month. Recently he has acquired wonderful grand children, but they don't quite know what to make of him and he tries to hug and make them smile as much as possible.

## Ross Winn



Born in Kansas, Ross Winn was raised in Missouri, Nebraska, Texas, and Florida. He began playing RPGs in 1977 (specifically, a boxed set of *D&D* "Brown Books" received as a gift for his eleventh year). Apart from many published pieces for RTG's *Cyberpunk 2020* RPG, he has also done work on *Mekton Zeta*, *Castle Falkenstein*, Night Shift's *UNSanctioned*, and others. His most recent work is on the *Action! System Core Rules* published by Gold Rush Games. Apart from RPGs, Ross enjoys his two children, cooking, music, art, an amazing group of friends, and a passionate love of books.

## Mark Arsenault



Mark has been writing and designing games since 1994 and is the president of Gold Rush Games. Mark's credits include *The Legacy of Zorro*, *Sengoku*, and the *Action! System Core Rules* book. He also does freelance design for other companies, including Citizen Games (*Sidewinder*), Grey Ghost Press (this book), and Firefly Games (*Monster Island*). He is also a co-founder and Director of the Game Publishers Association.

# INDEX

- Adventures ..... 9, 12, 19, 21-22, 23-25, 30, 31, 35, 37, 40, 44, 56, 58, 63, 64-66, 70, 77, 79, 82, 84, 92, 95, 101, 104-105, 114, 116, 117, 121-127, 139, 143, 148-149, 151-152
- Authority ..... 8, 13, 23, 35, 53, 54, 55, 57, 60, 115, 144, 157
- Beginning GMs ..... 8, 22, 35, 100-101
- Beginning Players ..... 27-29, 109-110, 111-113, 114-117, 145, 146
- Campaigns ..... 9, 14, 66, 67, 78, 82, 95, 98-100, 100-104, 105, 114, 116, 136, 142-144, 151
- Cards ..... 12
- Caves ..... 92, 98
- Character Creation ..... 26, 29, 30-31, 35, 50, 55, 58-59, 62, 68, 69-70, 72, 99, 105-108, 115-116, 156
- Character Death ..... 8, 49, 60-62, 143, 151
- Character Development ..... 22, 56-58, 59-60, 64, 107-108, 116, 134
- Character Flaws ..... 70, 107, 119, 121, 157
- Character Knowledge ..... 9, 52
- Cheating (see also *Fudging Results*) .. 49, 62-63, 81, 114
- Cities ..... 89-91, 98, 101
- Combat .... 13, 14-15, 18, 32, 33, 34, 42, 44-45, 64, 110, 149, 157
- Confidence ..... 74, 125, 126, 152
- Convention Games... 25, 28, 110, 133, 144, 145-152
- d20 System ..... 4, 11, 12, 14, 15, 21, 43, 68, 69, 70, 155-156
- Dialect ..... 39
- Dialog ..... 39-40
- Dice ..... 7, 12, 15, 17, 27, 28, 29, 35, 44, 45, 49-50, 60, 62, 68, 115, 120, 129, 132, 149-150, 151
- Difficulty ..... 18-19, 49, 50
- Drama ..... 71, 117, 150
- Dungeons ..... 25, 27, 92, 98, 99, 100, 102-103
- Espionage ..... 10, 11, 32, 40, 44, 58, 59, 65, 92
- Fantasy ..... 9, 10, 11, 22, 25, 31, 32, 38, 41, 42, 59, 87, 92, 93, 97, 101, 116, 123, 139, 154, 156, 159
- Feats ..... 15
- Food ..... 22, 28, 29, 43-44, 150
- Fudge System ..... 4, 11, 12, 16, 17-18
- Fudging Results (see also *Cheating*) ..... 49-50, 57, 60, 115, 132
- Game Stores ..... 12, 23, 27, 84, 110, 153
- Game Systems .... 11-12, 13, 17, 21, 28, 29, 35, 111, 129, 132, 142, 143, 144, 145, 153-156
- Gamemaster (GM) ..... 8, 9, 13, 15, 16, 17, 24, 35, 39, 45, 77, 82, 105-108, 114, 117, 127, 130-132, 142, 143-144, 153
- Gaming Space ..... 23-24, 32, 37, 52, 109, 110, 159
- Generic Systems ..... 11, 12, 156
- Genre ..... 9-12, 20, 21, 23, 29, 31-33, 38, 39, 42, 63, 64, 67-72, 73, 142, 143
- Ghosts (PCs) ..... 46-48
- GM Screen ..... 49
- Hack-and-slash ..... 30, 33, 99
- Historical ..... 73, 87, 92, 111, 156
- Hit Points ..... 14, 44, 50
- Horror ... 9, 11, 24, 31, 32, 33, 42, 44, 59, 65, 143, 154
- Humorous Games ..... 24, 31, 62
- Improvising (see *Winging It*)
- In Character ..... 9, 16, 33, 38, 39, 40, 41, 63, 117
- Inspiration ..... 73, 76, 87, 88, 95, 96, 101, 103, 126-127, 150
- Kids ..... 152-160
- Libraries ..... 74-75, 84, 87
- Magic ..... 9, 10, 11, 14, 25, 31, 59, 94, 99, 116, 156, 158
- Maps .... 20, 21, 37, 45, 73, 75, 82-100, 101, 103,



	124, 125, 138		37-38, 40-41, 45, 104-105, 120-121, 122, 132, 145-146, 148-150
Miniatures .....	15, 120, 125	Props .....	40-41, 73, 98-99
Missed Sessions .....	46-48, 57, 113	Puzzles .....	103, 128
Modern-day .....	10, 19, 41, 92, 154	Research .....	72-77
Modifiers .....	19, 44	Roleplaying....	69, 106, 129-130, 132, 144, 149, 159
Monsters ....	20, 27, 34, 45, 103, 104, 126, 128, 148, 151, 156, 157	Romance .....	30, 54, 107, 110, 113, 130
Mood .....	19, 24, 31-33, 37, 38, 39, 40, 43-44, 45	Rules .....	13-16, 16-19, 28, 35, 71, 85, 105, 107, 110, 114, 116, 117, 133, 142, 146-148, 158
Music .....	37, 41-43	Scenarios (see <i>Adventures</i> )	
Narration .....	31-32, 38-39, 42, 44-45, 55, 141	Science Fiction .....	9, 10-11, 32, 41, 42, 44, 59, 84-86, 87-88, 92, 97, 111, 116, 123, 143, 156, 159
Notes (passing) .....	54	Session ...	9, 37, 38, 39, 46-48, 56, 70, 76, 114, 124
Notes .....	37, 49, 125, 152, 158	Setting .....	19-21, 21-22, 25, 64, 67-72, 74, 75, 84, 104-105, 106
NPCs (Nonplayer Characters) ...	8, 9, 25, 26, 34, 35, 37, 38, 39, 40, 44, 45, 47, 50, 54, 55-56, 59, 62, 64, 65, 77-82, 101, 102, 104-105, 111, 117-122, 125-126, 157-158	Situation Rolls .....	17
Open Game License .....	2, 3, 4-5	Skills .....	12
Out of Character .....	18, 41, 42, 53	Space Opera .....	11
Pacing .....	22, 33, 35-36, 110, 150-151	Story .....	9, 17, 26, 35-36, 38, 49-50, 55, 63, 64, 65, 67-72, 77, 80, 105, 106
PCs (Player Characters) .....	8, 9, 10, 16, 18, 19, 20, 26-27, 30-31, 33-35, 37, 38, 39, 44, 46-48, 50-51, 54-55, 56-62, 66, 68-71, 78, 80, 81, 82, 104, 105-108, 111, 115-116, 120, 127-129, 138, 141, 148, 158	Style .....	117, 129
Player Knowledge .....	9, 52, 58	Superhero .....	59-60, 108, 123
Players .....	8, 9, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22-23, 25, 26, 27-29, 31, 32, 34, 35, 39, 40, 41, 43-44, 45, 46-48, 49, 55, 56, 57, 59, 60, 62-65, 66, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73-74, 76, 98-99, 100, 102, 105-108, 108-113, 114-117, 123-125, 126, 128, 130, 312-134, 135, 159-160	Technology .....	9
Plot .....	21, 22, 24-26, 35, 37, 39, 45, 47, 49-50, 57, 64, 65, 66, 74, 78, 82, 91, 104, 106, 110, 116, 123, 132, 143, 146-148, 148-149, 151, 152, 156	Time Travel .....	11, 99
Power levels .....	55-56, 57, 58, 69, 81	Timeline .....	26, 35, 38, 73, 99
Preparation ....	7, 12-11, 19-22, 24-26, 26-27, 30-31,	Traps	
		Treasure .....	22, 58, 64, 77, 103, 119, 134-141
		Trust .....	61, 129-134, 149
		Villains .....	21, 40, 41, 45, 55, 64, 77-82, 118, 119, 126, 149, 151
		Winging It .....	76, 117, 122-127, 146, 151—152
		Worldbuilding .....	84-95, 98, 100-104
		Wound Penalties .....	14, 15
		Zombies (PCs) .....	46-48

# NOTES

A series of horizontal lines for taking notes, overlaid with a faint, circular watermark. The watermark features a stylized, spiky crown or helmet design above a smiling face, surrounded by the text "Dungeons & Dragons" in a circular arrangement.

A faint background illustration of a character's head with a crown of spikes and a flame-like aura, surrounded by a circular arrangement of numbers. The page is filled with horizontal lines for taking notes.

NOTES

Lined writing area for notes, featuring a faint background illustration of a character's head with a crown of spikes.

NOTES

Lined writing area for notes, featuring a faint background illustration of a character's head with a crown of spikes and a ring of text.

NOTES

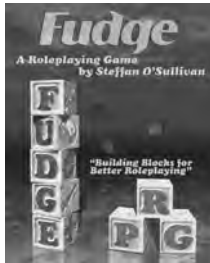
Lined writing area for notes, featuring a faint background image of a character's head with a crown of spikes.



# Grey Ghost Press, Inc.



## Fudge 10th Anniversary Edition! (2006 Ennies Nominee for "Best Product")



This hardcover edition of *Fudge* contains everything from the *Fudge Expanded Edition* (published in 2000) as well as extensive lists of character traits for character creation, alternative rules, advice on running *Fudge*, and more.

**GGG1020 Fudge RPG US \$34.99**

## The Deryni Adventure Game! (2005 Origins Awards RPG of the Year Nominee)

*The Deryni Adventure Game* is based on the popular "Deryni" series of fantasy books by Katherine Kurtz. The novels weave a rich tapestry of romantic chivalry, medieval kings, a powerful Church, and a persecuted race of humans with the gift of magic – the Deryni.

A perennial favorite of fans of medieval fantasy, the Deryni setting offers roleplayers a rich world of magic and kings and high adventure. *The Deryni Adventure Game* is a complete roleplaying game using the *Fudge* game system. Explore the kingdom of Gwynedd and the world of the Deryni as a campaign setting for medieval fantasy adventures!

**GGG6001 The Deryni Adventure Game**



**US \$39.99**

## The Eleven Kingdoms: Poster Map of the Deryni World

This full-color map of the Eleven Kingdoms area of the Deryni world measures 24" by 36" and is suitable for framing.

**GGG6004 The Eleven Kingdoms Poster Map US \$18.00**



## Deryni Dice

*Fudge* dice (4 black, 4 white) packaged in a pop-top storage cube. The dice double as props for "ward cubes" in the *Deryni Adventure Game*!

**GGG9008DA**

**US \$9.00**



## Gamemastering Secrets 2nd Ed. (2002 Origins Award Winner!)

Everything you need to know to become a good gamemaster! Includes guest articles on *Gamemastering for Kids*, *Winging It*, and much more!

**GGG4010 Gamemastering Secrets US \$34.99**

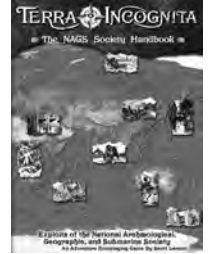


## Terra Incognita (2001 Origins Award Nominee!)

Exploration, Adventure, and Tea at Four with members of the National Archaeological, Geographic, and Submarine Society! Seek out lost cities, mysterious artifacts, and ancient secrets while saving the world!

**GGG5001 Terra Incognita:**

**The NAGS Society Handbook US \$22.95**



## Another Fine Mess (2000 Origins Award Nominee!)

An *Animal Companions* adventure featuring PC animals including a hawk, a horse, a hound, and a ferret. They're up against an evil Sorcerer, his Abominations, and a temple lair deep within a natural cave. With "All the Rules You Need to Know" and ready-to-run animal characters.

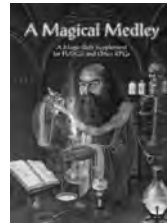
**GGG2001 Another Fine Mess US \$8.95**



## A Magical Medley (1997 Origins Award Nominee!)

A variety of magic systems for use with *Fudge* and other RPGs: *African Spirit Magic*, *Bioenergetics*, *Celtic Magic*, *Chinese Magic*, *The Gramarye*, and *Occultism*. **Plus:** Designing magic systems to suit any campaign and a miscellany of magic-related adventure seeds and items.

**GGG1002 A Magical Medley US \$19.95**



## Fudge Dice

Fudge dice are six-sided "plus/minus/neutral" dice for use with *Fudge* and other games. Roll four for results from -4 to +4: Abysmal to Legendary in *Fudge* terms! Available in GM's Packs (20 dice in 5 different colors) and Players Packs (4 dice of a single color)

**GGG9020MC GMs Pack (20 dice in 5 colors) US \$15.00**



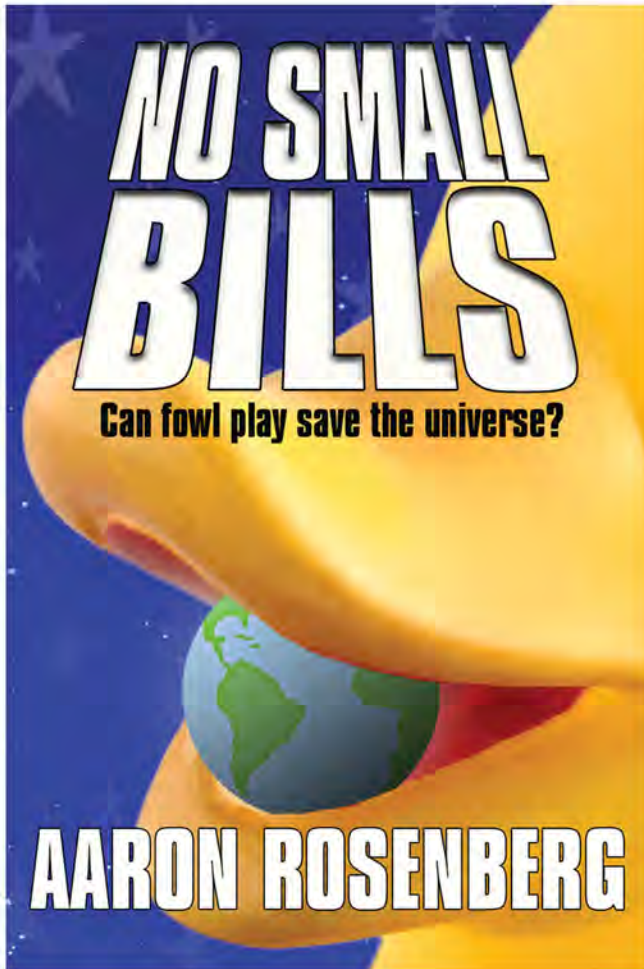
**GGG9004BK Players Tube (4 dice: Black),  
GGG9004BL Players Tube (4 dice: Blue),  
GGG9004I Players Tube (4 dice: Ivory),  
GGG9004R Players Tube (4 dice: Red),  
GGG9004W (4 dice: White) US \$5.25**



## Ordering Grey Ghost Games

Please ask your favorite game retailer to carry Grey Ghost Games! Send them to our website at [fudgerpg.com](http://fudgerpg.com) for more information. You can also purchase directly from Grey Ghost through our online store at [fudgerpg.com](http://fudgerpg.com).

READ THE BOOK THE NOOK BLOG CALLED  
"AN ABSURDLY BRILLIANT ROMP":



DuckBob Spinowitz is just an average, ordinary guy. Except he has the head of a duck. But does that really qualify him to save the universe?

Unfortunately, it looks like he's about to find out! Join DuckBob on a riotous adventure across the galaxy as he tries to stop an alien invasion with nothing but his good looks, his wit, and his charm.

We may be doomed.

And don't miss the side-splitting sequels:

**TOO SMALL FOR TALL**

and

**THREE SMALL COINKYDINKS**



CRAZY 8 PRESS

[www.crazy8press.com](http://www.crazy8press.com)



# NEED SOME DIRECTION?



Has your game got the blahs? Are your players spending more time thumbing through your book collection than hunting down clues, more energy heckling one another than in crushing their cruel foes? Never fear, o beleaguered Game Masters, for Robin D. Laws, noted game designer (*Feng Shui*, *Hero Wars*, *Dying Earth*, *Rune*) and columnist for *Dragon* magazine, is here to help.

Know your players! Analyze your system! Build your campaign! Design adventures! Prepare to be spontaneous, and improvise like a fiend!

Whether you're a beginner or an experienced roller of the polyhedrals, the insights in this book will improve your Game Mastering faster than you can say, "Roll for initiative!"

[www.sjgames.com/robinlaws/](http://www.sjgames.com/robinlaws/)

# ROBIN'S LAWS OF GOOD GAME MASTERING

**STEVE JACKSON GAMES**

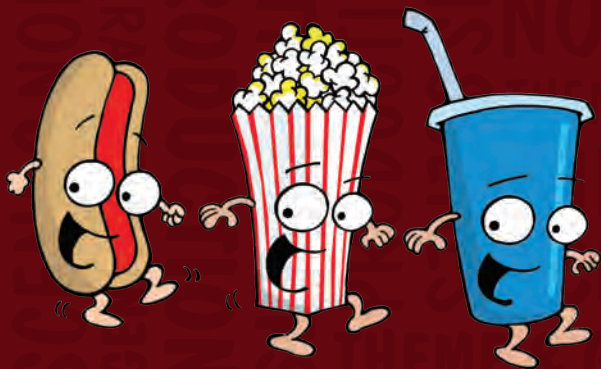
Copyright © 2002 Steve Jackson Games Incorporated.  
*Robin's Laws of Good Game Mastering* is a trademark of Steve Jackson Games. All rights reserved.

THE MOVIE GAME FOR EVERYONE!

# DOUBLE

# FEATURE

All you need to know  
are the **MOVIES** you've seen!



CAN YOU NAME A MOVIE THAT HAS BOTH ELEMENTS?



**AVAILABLE NOW!**



[www.renegadegames.com](http://www.renegadegames.com)