5 Campaign Lessons From THE HOBBIT FILMS

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Fantasy roleplaying draws much of its inspiration from J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth saga. With the last *Hobbit* film recently in theaters, it's fitting timing to reflect on the lessons of *The Hobbit* trilogy—both good and bad—that can be applied to our RPG campaigns.

1. Avoid GMPCs

The GMPC (Game Master Player Character) is a dangerous element to introduce into your campaign. Consider Legolas, a GMPC clumsily inserted into *The Hobbit* module by a GM with a penchant for elves. Legolas casually slaughters orc after orc in the final battle, but efficiency isn't the problem, it's the way he does it. Jumping, rolling, flipping, literally walking on air at points, all the while nary a hair out of place. Next to Legolas, even the mighty warrior Thorin Oakenshield is but a clumsy afterthought. Legolas uses up the air in every scene he's in, leaving no room for anyone else.

There's a subtle difference between a GMPC and an NPC that travels with the party. Mechanically they are often identical, built from PC classes. The difference is intent in use. GMPCs have agency. They are protagonists, on equal footing with the PCs themselves. In contrast, NPCs in the party are supporting characters, there to lend a sword, bandage a wound, or pick a lock. They are along for the ride and they don't dictate the direction of the story.

In *The Hobbit*, Gandalf is a well-behaved GMPC. He is mysterious and wise, and quite powerful, but you never get the sense that he is upstaging Bilbo, Thorin, and the rest. The wizard chums around with them, occasionally saving their bacon, but mostly provides context and backstory. And yet, even he can't help but steal the show from the PCs. In the films, the camera follows Gandalf when he meets with the White Council, and when he is captured in Dol Guldur (they should've sent Legolas, I guess). There's a rescue and a battle against Sauron and his minions that is quite entertaining, doesn't involve any of the PCs—Bilbo and the dwarves. Worse, it has nothing to do with the quest for Erebor. It's all a lot of GM self-indulgence.

Don't be that GM.

If you have NPCs travelling with the party, mind the line and avoid crossing into GMPC country. NPCs can counsel and advise and support, but shouldn't lead the party by the nose, shouldn't upstage the PCs with their *sheer awesomeness*, and should never derail the adventure to follow their own whims. Story agency should remain with the players at all times.

2. Named Weapons Imply History

Glamdring, Foe-hammer. Orcrist, Goblin-cleaver. Sting. Magical weapons in Middle-earth come with evocative names along with their cool powers. There is a sense of grandiose history as Elrond carefully handles the swords and supplies their ancient names. These are relics as much as they are swords; they are an opportunity to explore your campaign's history.

Imagine the party has vanquished a tribe of goblins nested in the low hills and, while sifting through the piles of broken pottery and gnawed bones in the back of the warren, find a short sword traced with silvery runes. Beautifully balanced, the sword is obviously worth something. How and why it was buried amid the trash is only part of the mystery. When swung, the sword elicits a low hum that only the party's elves can hear, and far off, wolves begin to howl. The party has just discovered *Eventide*, an ancient weapon with a tragic history.

Name magical weapons to suggest a history for your campaign setting. Likewise, evoke an air of mysticism by limiting the PC's ability to determine what the weapon does. After all, even Gandalf needed to take his new sword to an appraiser. Is it immersive if the wizard can simply cast *identify* to that the blade is a *+2 longsword* which can cast *sympathy* on wolves, but at a 1% risk of the bearer developing lycanthropy? Or is it better if the party has to figure out what to do about the pack of wolves that has entered the caves and rolled over, showing their bellies?

Perhaps *identify* is a higher-level spell in your campaign setting. Maybe magical weapons can't be identified by a spell and must instead be taken to an expert on such things. Beyond being a way to draw out the mystery, there should be an in-world explanation for why *identify* doesn't work, which also serves to build your world.

When your PCs come across a magic item, don't feel pressured to immediately supply a name or even list its powers. It may require some paperwork to secretly apply any bonuses until they are discovered, but it's a small price to pay to bring some real magic into the story.

3. Dragons are Terrifying

Smaug is everything a dragon ought to be: enormous, powerful, cunning, mistrustful, jealous, and most of all, terrifying. Smaug razed the city of Dale, kicked down Erebor's front door, and annihilated the dwarven forces marshaled inside. Neither arrow nor blade could puncture his hide. Multitudes fell to tooth and claw and flame, and the only survivors were those that fled.

If you want to inspire fear and dread in your PCs at the mere idea of dragons, two things must be done. First, sprinkle in dragons with care. If your world is fraught with drakes and wyrmlings and young dragons, the PCs will be steadily desensitized to dragons long before the truly frightening beasties fly in. Limiting dragons also is another opportunity to world-build. It says something about your campaign setting if there are no young dragons. Are they tucked away someplace safe to mature for a few hundred years? Where, and why, and by whom? Or did they all die off due to disease or extermination or genocide? Is the discovery of a dragon egg tantamount to a death sentence? Or will the thing just never hatch?

In addition to using dragons less often, set the scene with colorful, specific language when you use them. Describe the flights of birds taking wing as the dragon comes to ground, crushing wagon-sized boulders under its talons. The ear-splitting roar, rattling bones in its wake. Let the players feel a sliver of dread, then drop the dragon's Frightful Presence to give that terror a mechanical effect—save vs. fear!

Once into the combat, make full use of the dragon's arsenal. Liberally vary the use of bite, claw, and tail attacks. Dragons shouldn't be static: take wing, raze the ground with fire, and land upon the battlefield in a new spot, away from the frontline fighters and near the squishy wizards. If the ground is flammable, use the flames to hem the party in. In addition to being deadly, dragons are intelligent. Use tactics accordingly.

And taunt the PCs.

Taunt them mercilessly.

4. Social Encounters Can Be More Interesting Than Combat

Some of the best scenes in *The Hobbit* trilogy are the ones where Bilbo riddles with Gollum and again with Smaug. The riddles themselves are certainly fun, but what's most interesting is the idea that not every encounter must end with blades drawn.

When confronted with a dragon, sometimes the prudent course is to talk to it, if only for long enough to effect an escape.

The fifth-edition system doesn't model in-depth social encounters as well as some other RPGs. For example, Green Ronin's *A Song of Ice and Fire Roleplaying Game* includes an intricate system called Intrigue, where a kind of social combat decides the outcome of a verbal exchange. Most fantasy RPGs are instead built with combat as their highest priority. There are two takeaways if you want to bring another option to the table.

First, use non-combat abilities to their fullest potential. All of the Charisma-based skills apply, and you could even make an argument for skills like Investigation, Stealth, or Sleight of Hand, depending on the circumstances. Additionally, don't put it all on a single roll. Build drama into the encounter by requiring multiple successes or failures. If the PCs need to talk their way past a gatekeeper with a starting attitude of *indifferent*, perhaps they need two successful *persuasion* attempts, the first to shift the NPC to *friendly*, and the second to let them pass. Likewise, if the guard is *hostile*, the next failure results in him issuing an alarm.

Second, if your players are the sort to kill first and ask questions second, you may need to take combat off the table sometimes. Put them in an impossible situation, where combat is akin to suicide: alone, with an ancient red dragon, for example. Or perhaps they're forced to act as diplomatic envoys, and one misstep will result in war.

Be ready with the carrot once they've overcome the proverbial stick. Defeating an adversary through the use of wiles should be rewarded the same as killing one, perhaps even more so if the attempt was particularly inspired.

5. The Most Powerful Conflicts Come From Within

"The human heart in conflict with itself is the only thing worth writing about."

—William Faulkner

In *The Hobbit*, we see this play out in the hearts of a dwarf and a hobbit, although we only just glimpse the beginning of Bilbo's struggle against the One Ring's allure. But it is these struggles of the conscious that forms the central conflict in the two Middle-earth trilogies.

In RPGs, we see this concept most often in the tortured Paladin stereotype, walking the razor's edge between good and evil, his soul a literal battleground. But it doesn't have to be quite so trite or melodramatic. And, indeed, it's better if it's not.

It starts with knowing the difference between external and internal desires. External desires are goals or motivations. They are the things that PCs are striving for, and they are probably noted somewhere on their character sheet. Things like: finding a lost loved one, avenging the family name, opening an inn. In contrast, an internal desire is a secret kept in the PC's darkest heart. These typically go deep, illuminating who the character is, and therefore can be a bit embarrassing.

Bilbo expresses his external desire frequently throughout the film, fervently in the early days, and more wistfully as the hour grows dark: being back home in the Shire, surrounded by his precious things. And yet he lingers even when he's not wanted,

even when his life is in jeopardy. Why? Because internal desire trumps external want every time. For Bilbo, his hidden desire was to take part in a real adventure.

Uncover the secrets that drive your PCs. Require your players to provide an external goal, since those are easy hooks upon which to hang the campaign. But even more importantly, suggest they also provide their PC's secret desire, something they would be suitably mortified about if brought to light. Perhaps the high-born knight wishes to join a circus troupe, or the dour fighter fancies himself a dancer, or the wizard can't read, but longs to learn even while he secretly gets by on luck and improvisation.

Your players might not know the secret driving their character when they first roll their stats. This is especially true with newer players, or those that like to discover and develop their character during play. Indeed, there is a certain magic in allowing things to develop organically. That's okay; when isn't as important as what. If you want to mechanically reward your players for participating, you could treat the pursuit of these secret desires as another way of earning inspiration.

Once you have them, hoard their secrets as a dragon hoards its gold. Wait for the perfect moment to dangle the PC's desire, ideally at a most inopportune time. If you can put the desire at odds with the current aim of the group, all the better for your story!

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