



Notes from the Bunker **He's Dead, Jim!**

by Rich Redman

Welcome to my bunker. As one of the designers of the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*, and a veteran of real-world modern combat (having served as a tank platoon leader in Operation: Desert Storm), I'm in a unique position to offer insights into the game.

A Good Day to Die?

This month's topic is keeping your cool -- but this time it's advice for GMs, not an optional rule for heroes. You don't have to GM for long before a player does something so far out in left field that you don't see it coming. Such a situation can quickly lead to campaign meltdown unless you have the tools you need to deal with the unexpected.

Consider the following hypothetical game situation.

GM: Okay, Dr. Negative steps behind his control chair, activates. . . .

Player One: Wait! I had an action readied to shoot Dr. Negative if he tried working any of his controls.

Player Two: Besides, we cut the power before we came in here.

GM: Yeah, but Dr. Negative is always prepared, and the emergency generator. . . .

Player Three: No way, dude! I spiked the emergency generator before we cut the power.

Player Two: And Dr. Negative already threw a warp grenade this round, so he can't both move and take a standard action. . . .

Player One: Hey! I rolled a critical!

Sometimes players forget that roleplaying games are really cooperative storytelling, and they refuse to cut you any slack, especially when they've got the master villain in their sights and the smell of blood in their nostrils. If you planned on that master villain being the source of adventures for months to come, you have to stay flexible to find your way out of a situation like this one.

I don't know about you, but I can get so committed to a certain course of action (whether in a game or in real life) that everything I do is geared toward that one goal instead of toward achieving what I really want to accomplish. I'm sure other GMs have similar tendencies. But you have to keep in mind the overall

purpose of your campaign -- not just the storyline you have planned.

So what's your overall goal? In the larger sense, your game is meant to let everyone (including you) have some fun, and that's what you have to focus on -- not what happens to a specific villain or plotline. Of course, having your plans suddenly derailed can mean a lot more work for you, and that can detract from your enjoyment of the game. So if it looks like the heroes are about to kill your master villain early, there are many options you can pursue -- even on the spur of the moment.

There are three broad categories of response to this kind of situation. You can choose a metagaming solution, you can fight back, or you can go with the flow. Each category encompasses several options for salvaging the situation.

Metagaming

This option covers any method of solving the problem outside the game itself, either by involving the players, or by making a few judicious, spur-of-the-moment decisions.

Talk to the Players: This solution isn't for everyone. But if your players are committed participants in the campaign, try just telling them that you have a lot more adventures tied to this villain and he shouldn't die yet. Then ask them to come up with roleplaying reasons why he might get away. A weapon could jam, an explosive could be a dud, the only hero with an action could choose to tend the wounded instead of attacking, or some other unexpected snafu might allow him to escape. Of course, for this solution to work, your villain has to be exciting enough that the players want to match wits with him over and over again.

Break the Rules: Some people consider this notion cheating, and I can see their point. Rules give the game a structure that players depend on, the way we depend on gravity to work the same way every day. Thus, you want to avoid breaking rules if possible. After all, if heroes succeed or fail at the GM's whim, then there's really no point in playing. On the other hand, sometimes you need to fudge a little. In the example above, for instance, you might declare that activating the controls is a free action, thereby allowing Dr. Negative to take all the necessary actions in a single round.

Make Something Up: This concept can seem overwhelming, but you don't need to make up something big, and you don't need to do it advance. In the example above, Dr. Negative might have a super-speed field (activated by a device on his belt) that boosts his Defense and lets him take an extra standard action every round. Perhaps he has an assistant who has readied an action to activate a force field or lower bulletproof glass if someone tries to shoot at the boss. You can stat out the device or explain the rules later. Just because you didn't plan something in advance to cover every eventuality doesn't mean that your master villain didn't. After all, he may be much smarter than you are.

Fight Back

Solutions in this category depend on advance planning or campaign strictures to bail out your villain.

Toady, Fetch My Slippers: Every time your heroes have a chance to shoot at your master villain, there is a chance that he will fail a Fortitude save against massive damage and die from a single gunshot wound. So don't show your hand too early. Keep the villain in the shadows for as long as you can. After all, what villain with reasonable intelligence would allow himself to become an obvious target when he can advance

his plans through proxies, thugs, and agents? Let the heroes find evidence that a master villain exists, but keep them at arm's length until you're ready for a big showdown.

Take Hostages: One of the dumbest things a master villain can do is face the heroes alone in his isolated secret lair. If you can't arrange for the big encounter to happen in a crowded restaurant or shopping mall, the villain can still take hostages, even if he has to grapple a hero and use her as a human shield. If you remind your players about the rules for striking the cover instead of the target, you should be able to get them to think twice about shooting, especially if you have used and enforced those rules before. Such a tactic could buy your master villain enough time to escape. Similarly, he could easily rig a "dead man's switch" that will activate a bomb if he dies, forcing your heroes to decide whether to wipe out both themselves and a large segment of the local citizenry by killing him, or wait and fight him another day.

Surrender, Dorothy: One of the most important differences between fantasy and modern roleplaying games is the emphasis on killing. In most modern RPGs, killing another human being is murder. Even if your heroes work for a law-enforcement agency, they can't kill the master villain unless he is actively threatening their lives or the lives of those under their protection. You can take advantage of that restriction on the good guys by having the villain surrender. The heroes might still kill him, but the surrender should create some interesting roleplaying opportunities.

Jailhouse Rock: This solution works along the same lines as surrender. Someone has to transport the master villain to and from his place of incarceration, and he must spend at least some time in a holding cell waiting for his bail hearing. I'm not suggesting that you place a lot of emphasis on revolving-door justice or courtroom drama. What I am suggesting is that "jailed" is not the same as "dead." Either the master villain himself or his surviving henchmen should have plenty of opportunities to break out, either by means of some secret plan or just because of human negligence.

Go with the Flow

Sometimes, it's best to just let the master villain die -- or at least appear to. After all, his demise doesn't necessarily have to derail all your plans.

Avenge My Death: Some villains have families that object strenuously to his death. Maybe a family member is willing to take up the equipment, costume, and *modus operandi* of the deceased. And maybe such a relative is bent on vengeance.

Clone, Clone on the Range: When your heroes kill the master villain, it turns out that he was only a clone. The *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game* makes cloning relatively simple by providing the replacement template in Chapter Eight: Friends and Foes.

This tactic can make for a lot of frustration on the part of the players. In order to minimize this reaction, you should always leave clues that the person they killed was a clone and provide a way for them to benefit from that knowledge. For example, if they learn that the villain transferred his memories into the clone only once per week, then the clone should be missing at least a day's worth of information relating to the heroes at any given time. Needless to say, you also need to provide the heroes with a way to triumph in the end.

In the Future, There Will Be Robots: This solution is similar to the one above, but the master villain uses robot doubles whenever he risks facing the heroes. Dr. Doom made this tactic famous in **Marvel** comics. The advantage that this solution provides is that you can make every robot slightly different, since the

villain is constantly seeking the optimum combination of abilities to defeat the heroes.

Did You See the Corpse? This solution is a classic comic book routine, and it's entirely appropriate when you're trying to save a master villain for later use. When the villain "dies," have the ceiling fall in. Have him activate a transport device with his dying breath. Have a fire break out, or have his goons break in and drive the heroes behind cover while they retrieve their boss's "corpse." Do whatever it takes to distract the heroes from the villain's body long enough for it to vanish. If they don't have a corpse, the villain isn't dead.

Send in the Stunt Double: Saddam Hussein always had numerous doubles who appeared in public disguised as him. Most even underwent plastic surgery in order to look more like him. This tactic presents an advantage similar to that of the robot solution, in that every "stunt double" could have a different combination of classes, skills, and feats. However, the stunt double solution depends less on super-advanced technology than the robot one. Furthermore, after-the-fact detection is easy -- any forensic investigator can discover the ruse just by examining the corpse.

Lose Graciously: If all else fails, compliment your players on their resourcefulness, give them their rewards, and tell them that someone else will have to GM while you figure out where to take the campaign next. Their elation at having beaten the campaign's primary bad guy may wear off quickly once they realize that they've derailed their gaming opportunities for the near future.

About the Author

Before [Rich Redman](#) came to the RPG R&D department at Wizards of the Coast, Inc., he had been an Army officer, a door-to-door salesman, the manager of a computer store, a fundraiser for a veterans' assistance group, and the manager of Wizards of the Coast, Inc.'s Customer Service department. Rich is a prolific game designer who has worked on the **Dungeons & Dragons** game, the **d20 Modern Roleplaying Game**, the **Marvel Super Heroes Adventure Game**, and **Dark*Matter**. When he's not working as vice president of [The Game Mechanics](#), a d20 design studio, Rich does freelance game design, cooks, and practices yoga, tai chi, and silat.