



YOUR
BEST GAME



EVERTM
BY MONTE COOK



YOUR BEST GAME EVER



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INTRODUCTION

Every hobby has a go-to guidebook. Definitive and broad in scope, it's the thing that every seasoned veteran has, and it's the book that every newcomer is encouraged to get. The one that comes to mind for me is *Wonderbook* by Jeff VanderMeer, a very comprehensive look at writing science fiction and fantasy.

I've always felt that roleplaying games needed a book like this. Particularly now. Because the hobby's been around for forty years, yet we're still seeing a wonderful influx of new people.

Roleplaying game designers churn out books. It's what we do. Rulebooks. Sourcebooks. Settings. Adventures. Bestiaries. Player option guidebooks. Character compendiums. This book isn't like any of those. This book won't teach you how to play a given game. It won't give you new ways to make your character super powerful or provide you with more challenges for the players that will make them wish they had a book on how to make their characters super powerful.

This book won't help you with any of that.

This isn't a game book—it's a book about gaming.

Yet there have already been books about gaming. About game mastering. About playing. I've worked on more than a few myself. What makes *Your Best Game Ever* different?

It's a how-to book for all the things that we take for granted, but probably shouldn't. How do you find a good game group? How does a GM create an adventure suited to the people around their table? What do you do when one player diminishes everyone else's fun? What are some tips for hosting a game in your home? What about if you're playing online?

Sometimes I feel like rules on how to play our games fill our bookshelves to well over their recommended capacity, but rules on how to actually participate in this hobby are just gained through experience. Sometimes, they're passed along by word of mouth (or posts on the internet). Sitting around a table with five or six other friends for hours at

a time pretending to be other people is actually damn hard to pull off. We take it for granted, but roleplaying games (RPGs) raise challenges that we don't often (or ever) face in any other context.

That's why I wanted to write this book. For people new to the hobby, those of us who have been playing since the beginning, and everyone in between, this is a compendium of all the stuff you need to know about RPGs, no matter what role you play or what rules or setting you enjoy.

The book is divided into understanding and getting started in RPGs, being a player, being a game master, and general game topics. But this isn't a stuffy book on theory. I wanted to provide suggestions you can use to create better characters with character arcs, real recipes you can make for game night (and spruce up for your genre of choice), thoughts on setting the right mood depending on genre, plot ideas, character ideas, and other ready-to-use material.

My hope is that no matter who you are, this book will enable you to become a better gamer. The parts of it I didn't write—all the contributions you'll find sprinkled throughout by our consulting experts—certainly have made me a better gamer. I wanted their help because I actively wanted different opinions, outlooks, and life experiences to inform the book's contents.

I love RPGs. I want to do whatever I can to help you create and manage a great game group, build an interesting world, create fantastic characters, and in every way possible have the best experience you can have. And no, I'm not doing this just for altruistic reasons. It's in my best interest for you to have your best game ever. The more people who love RPGs like I do and the better the experiences they have, the more people there will be to play the games I design. And truly, that's the case for all of us. The more great gamers there are, the more great games we'll all get to play. So find some content in this book that speaks to you, use it in your next game, and share the advice with all your gaming friends. (And, you know, this book makes a great gift. I'm just sayin'.)



PART 1: ROLEPLAYING GAMES



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CHAPTER 1: SO YOU WANT TO PLAY AN RPG

So you've decided to give tabletop roleplaying games a try. But they're weird, right? They're not like Monopoly, poker, or even World of Warcraft, really. What's the deal with these games?

BRAND NEW TO THE CONCEPT?

If you're pretty new to this hobby, and you're still not sure what roleplaying games (RPGs) are, the best advice I can impart is that they're not as complex or involved as you think (or perhaps fear). Remember when you were young and you pretended to be Spider-Man or Storm or Luke Skywalker? You were roleplaying.

I think this is why, in my experience in teaching RPGs to people, kids always get the concept right away. Because they roleplay all the time. As we get older, we sometimes forget what it's like to pretend to be someone else. We think "taking on a role" is a big, involved, and maybe even intimidating idea. But it isn't, really. Think back to being a kid, when you pretended to be an explorer by a volcano and the floor was lava. You did instinctively what such an explorer would do—you avoided the lava by climbing on a chair and then jumping on the couch. In an RPG, you might be told, "Okay, you're by a volcano and there's lava all around, what do you do?" You reply, "I climb up on a rock and avoid touching the lava."

Done. You're roleplaying.

You might be tempted to latch onto the rules of the game at first, because that feels familiar. You've played board games before, and you've done that by learning the rules to start with. How many tiles do you get in Scrabble? Who goes first in Monopoly? There are definitive answers to those questions, and they're found in the rules. In an RPG, there will be stats and numbers and character abilities, and that's all well and good, but before you start looking for your understanding there, get

a good handle on what a roleplaying game really is. Because it's not like Scrabble or Monopoly.

First of all, let's get a big issue out of the way. How do you win an RPG? The quick answer is: you don't. It's not that kind of game. The real answer, however, is a bit more complicated. You win by creating a great story with your friends. Because that's the goal of the game. That's what a roleplaying game is: joint storytelling.

It's a little like your favorite ongoing television series, but rather than passively watching, you're helping to create the story.

A few more things that might trip you up at first:

- ☞ There is no board or game pieces (although you might play with visual aids, dice, and recordkeeping tools).
- ☞ The game has one player who is called the game master (GM), and they have a slightly different role in the game.
- ☞ The game has no endpoint unless you decide for it to be over.

FINDING OUT MORE

This section offers suggestions for learning more about RPGs. There are many roleplaying games, though, and they're not all the same. You'll want to focus mostly on learning the specifics of the game or games you want to play (although if that in and of itself is mystifying, we'll get to choosing a game in the next chapter).

READ A RULEBOOK

Every RPG has rules. The rulebook for a game tries to explain how to play the game—what dice to roll when, what the characters probably do, and what the setting is like. This makes the rulebook a really good way to understand how it all works, specifically for that game. Page through a couple of different books for a few different games and you'll



start getting the big picture. But some of these books are dense and unapproachable. Lots of rules and jargon and sometimes even big charts with lots of numbers. Here's the truth, though—you can skip over a lot of the details on your first read-through. You might learn that in order to see if you succeed at a task in the game, you roll a twenty-sided die and hope for a high number. Great. Then the rulebook starts talking about all the various modifiers for all the various things that might occur in the game. Skip that. You don't need to know any of that kind of stuff until you start playing.

Focus on learning what characters do in the game, generally speaking, and how they do it. A good game designer knows that this is the crux of every game. A game should be able to answer “What do characters do in this game?” in a single statement. If you're talking about Pathfinder, a fantasy RPG, the answer is, “Characters explore dungeons, fight monsters, and gain treasure.” That's not the sum total of Pathfinder, obviously, but it's a very good starting point. In

Call of Cthulhu, a horror RPG, the answer is, “Characters investigate occurrences of the Cthulhu Mythos and try to prevent them from causing harm to humanity without going insane.” The key words in both of those examples are verbs: explore, fight, gain, investigate, and prevent. They tell you a lot. They tell you that Pathfinder is about going into unknown places and overcoming foes. Call of Cthulhu is about solving mysteries and confronting horrors that might be too much for the characters.

WATCH STREAMED GAMES ONLINE

We live in a great time for new people to enter the hobby of roleplaying games because now you can watch people play them online! In the early days, roleplaying seemed arcane and strange. What actually went on when people played these odd games? No one but the players knew, and it caused real issues. Misinformed people thought the games (specifically Dungeons & Dragons) involved the occult, and that playing

the games was related to Satanism. (Fantasy, especially the “sword and sorcery” flavor, was not as ubiquitous in the culture back then. This is way before *Game of Thrones* and *Harry Potter*.)

When people asked me about the “strangeness” of RPGs, my advice was always “Just watch a game for ten minutes, and you’ll see that it’s harmless—maybe a bit goofy—but imaginative fun.” I stand by that answer, but if you weren’t already playing, sometimes it was hard to find a game to watch.



Now it’s incredibly easy.

You can do a quick search online and find literally thousands of videos of people playing games. Some of these are extremely professional with a setup that is “cheated” toward the camera. Others are much more casual and are like a normal session around a table that just happens to be on camera. Both are entertaining and instructive.

Watch a few of these, and you’ll absolutely get the idea of the dynamic between the GM and the players. You’ll get a peek at how the rules work for that particular game and the kinds of things that characters do. You’ll see GMs come up with answers to player questions, even the ones they weren’t necessarily expecting.

In other words, you’ll learn a lot.

GO TO A GAME STORE

There are stores in many areas—sometimes even in smaller communities—that focus on selling RPGs (and usually other games like board games, miniatures games, and so on, and they might also sell comics, plastic models, model trains, or materials for other hobbies). If you’re fortunate enough to live near a store that sells roleplaying games, pay them a visit. It’s not just a good place to buy games; the people who work there can often answer your questions about how a game works. They might even run demonstrations (“demos”) of games that you can join in, or host a regular game group that meets right in the shop that you can join or maybe just watch.

While most stores go out of their way to be welcoming to new players, it can still be intimidating to be surrounded by a bunch of new games and people that you’re unfamiliar with. Take a friend with you. Even if that friend’s never been in the store either, they can help navigate this new world you’re entering. You can also call the store ahead of time if you’d rather and ask if they have any demos or programs for new gamers.

You’ll find many employees in a store to be helpful, and even other gamers there to shop will be happy to tell you how a particular game

works. Expect them to be opinionated, of course, but you'll often get the information you're looking for. (Or even more—gamers can be very passionate about games!)

FINDING A GAME GROUP

Obviously, one of the main requirements for playing an RPG is having a group of people to play with.

Go to a store that sells games. This is a great resource. The person behind the counter can likely tell you about local game groups that are active, and maybe even which ones are looking for players. Often, the staff of the store hosts games themselves. These games will be at specified times, and they'll even teach you how to play in a demo, so all you need to do is show up.

However, the absolute best way to learn to play an RPG is to have an experienced friend invite you to play it with their existing group. Now, this is a luxury that not everyone has, but if you know and like someone who already plays RPGs, you've hit the jackpot. They'll very likely be thrilled to teach you the rules and show you the ropes, and before you know it, you'll be gaming with them.

If none of these ideas work, you're not out of luck—you just have a bit more of a challenge. You'll have to read the rules of the game, get an idea of what you're doing, and then find some friends to join you. You'll all have to work together to figure it out, but you can do it. It's the way many people started early on, of course, because there was no one to teach new players or invite them to an existing game. Back then, everyone was new and there were no existing games. Look at it like this: following this method is the surest way to get to play the game you want, the way you want, right from the start. You and your friends will all learn the game together, and that's a bonding experience. And you won't have to worry that some people are more experienced than others, because you'll all be at the same level.





PLAYING AN RPG FOR THE FIRST TIME

If this is all new to you, there are six bits of advice you should take to heart before you make your first die roll.

1. Don't Panic.

Many RPGs have big rulebooks, seemingly complicated rules and instructions, and weird settings. Even the very premise of an RPG itself—that you and your friends pretend to be different people in imaginary situations—is pretty unique. It's not like playing chess or soccer or charades. But that's okay. That's why you're giving it a try, because it's not like other games.

Don't worry about all the rules and the genre conventions and the books involved. No, you really don't have to read that whole book (or this one) before you can play. Ideally, someone else in the game has played before, and they can help show you the ropes. You shouldn't feel like you have to do work to play a game, and if you've got someone who has experience, they can help get you past that and straight into playing the game.

Maybe, in fact, you want to start by just watching a session of your friends playing to get an idea of what's going on and what kinds of things you can expect. You'll likely see that everyone's having a lot of fun and feelings of intimidation fade quickly.

If everyone at the table is new to RPGs, it will take a little more effort to get going, but hopefully you can share the responsibility of finding how the rules work and what's going on. Watch a few games being played online. Search for "streaming RPG" or "actual play RPG" and you'll get a ton of links to videos to watch. Try a couple of different ones to get a feel.

2. The First Time Won't Be Perfect.

Everyone gets a rule wrong, particularly when they start. Your ideas for a character to play or what actions to take at first won't always be perfect. Later, you might look back on your first session and realize what you should have done.

That's okay. In fact, it's expected. The first time you go bowling, you're going to throw a lot of gutter balls. And that's just fine. Because during your first time, you're learning how heavy the ball is, that you're

not supposed to cross the line, and that knocking down even half the pins is a feat worth a little bragging and a pat on the back. It's the same with an RPG. When you start, you're just wrapping your mind around the whole thing and getting a look at how it's supposed to work. You'll probably come away from your first session with more questions than you started with.

But that's exciting. You've stepped into a whole new world in more ways than one. You'll see that there's simply no better way to express your imagination in a group than playing an RPG. You'll see how every session is entirely new, and filled with laughter and crazy situations and the occasional very cool story moment as great as something from your favorite novel, movie, or TV show.

3. Anything Is Possible.

This is what trips a lot of new players up. In a board game or a computer game, you've got a set number of options each time you get a turn. But in an RPG, at least in most cases, you can try whatever you want. In our first RPG encounter, we all expect to be told something like "You can move, you can attack, or you can use a special item." Most of us aren't ready to hear that you could also recite a memorized sonnet, take off your shoe and throw it at your enemy, or try any of the other infinite things that might cross your mind.

The trick here is to not be overwhelmed. Sometimes, too many options are more paralyzing than just a few. Maybe ask another player or the GM, "What are the kinds of things I might do here?" I guarantee they'll be happy to suggest a few actions. Choose what seems like the most straightforward thing for your character. At the same time, though, remember that if you do have a crazy idea, you might want to go with it. Because here's the real truth: experienced players can get bogged down in what they think the rules suggest is the "best" action in a situation. A new player can interject creativity and originality precisely because they're not experienced or extremely familiar with the rules.

Eventually, after you've played a few sessions, you'll discover that it's often when a player comes up with some really imaginative or original idea for their action that RPGs get really fun. Because at that moment you realize that you couldn't create the story you're creating in any other medium. A board game or a computer game, with their limited number of options, would never allow for the utter freedom you're allowed in an RPG.

4. There Are No Wrong Answers.

This is closely related to #3, but it's worth calling out on its own. Because at some point in a game, the GM will ask you "What do you do?" and you will fear that your answer might be the wrong one.

Don't.

There are *no* right or wrong answers to that question, as long as you're doing something that's fun, that's a part of the story, and that doesn't hurt anyone else at the table. (That last point might sound intimidating, but all I basically mean is "Don't be a jerk," and you need to pay attention to that anytime you're in a social situation, not just an RPG.)

5. There Are No Wrong Questions.

You're going to have a lot of questions before, during, and after the game session. That's okay. Feel free to ask them (although, as always, respect other people's space—if they're in the middle of resolving an action for their own character, wait until they're done). Remember, though, that this is your first time, and no one's expecting you to master or even understand every aspect of the game.

6. You're All in It Together.

Roleplaying games are a group storytelling endeavor. You're working *with* everyone around the table, not *against* them. Look to them for help and advice when you need it, and expect to succeed through teamwork.

THINGS THAT WE FORGET NOT EVERYONE KNOWS

We—and by “we,” I mean people who play a lot of RPGs—forget that we use jargon and make assumptions about our games that confuse or confound newcomers. These assumptions are so pervasive, in fact, that sometimes we game designers neglect to even explain them in the rules.

As experienced players, we need to realize that this kind of thing puts up barriers to new players and keeps them from trying to join us. If you’re a new player, take a look at the following assumptions and ideas, and you’ll be well ahead of the game when an experienced player starts telling you about all the campaigns they’ve played in, all the crits their character has scored, and all the monsters they’ve fought.

Although it’s a game, there aren’t winners or losers. Playing an RPG is about creating a story as a group. It’s not about beating the GM and it’s absolutely not about beating the other players.

RPGs are typically played in sessions. A session is usually a few hours long and mainly consists of all the players, including the GM, sitting around a table or in chairs in the living room, talking. In this book, we’ll often use “the table” as a way to refer to the group playing the game, as in “Come to the table ready to have fun.” But you don’t need a table to play. (For example, as a kid, I played on the school bus.)

Because RPG sessions usually take place around a table, they often work best when at someone’s house or at a public place that has space for the whole group and an atmosphere conducive to a bunch of people pretending to be someone else for a few hours. (See *Hosting the Game*, page 205.)

When we talk about “playing” or “running” a character, we mean “deciding what that character does.” It also involves resolving that character’s actions, usually by rolling dice and using actions described in the rules. For example, if you’re “running” a wizard, you’ll probably cast some spells and the rules will tell you how those spells work.

Every player typically has one character, and that character is precisely like a character in a story that you read or watch. Your character’s details will be recorded on a character sheet. The GM usually doesn’t have a character, but instead runs all the other people the characters will meet in the game.

“Character” is not the same as “player.” If the GM says that your character takes damage, that’s just something to record on your character sheet and it has nothing to do with you, the player. Likewise, if a player makes a statement in character, that’s not the same as saying what they—the player—actually think or believe. You don’t have to believe in magic to play a witch.

While every game has its own jargon, there are a few abbreviations that are essentially generic. “GM” means game master. “PC” means player character. “NPC” means “nonplayer character” (a side character run by the GM). Almost as common, “XP” means experience point(s).

Try to remember the conventions of the genre for your game. If you’re playing a game set in medieval times, your character can’t check the internet or call someone on the phone. You don’t need to be a historical expert, but you’ll be expected to understand the broad strokes.

You typically play the same character session after session to tell an ongoing story, but sometimes your group will start a new “campaign,” and that means a new ongoing story, probably with new characters.

Sometimes, you’ll play in a stand-alone game session, where the entire game is played in just one afternoon or evening. This isn’t a campaign, it’s a “one-shot game.” Although people play one-shots at home all the time, they are frequently associated with playing at game conventions.

You probably know that Dungeons & Dragons is the oldest and most popular RPG and that it's kind of like *The Lord of the Rings*, with elves and magic and such. But there are many other roleplaying games, often distinguished by their genre in the same way that D&D is a fantasy RPG. So you might play a science fiction RPG, a superhero RPG, a horror RPG, and so on.

◆

Your group might use miniature figurines to represent their characters. These are usually metal or plastic statues that kind of look like your character a little to help you remember which one is “you.” Or you might use little tokens, buttons, coins, or whatever in the same fashion, and you’ll just have to remember that the blue button is your dwarf character and the quarter is the burly fighter. Or the group might not use anything, and all the action remains in what we call “the theater of the mind,” which is simply to say, imagination. In the first case, if your character walks closer to the door in the room, you’ll probably move the token or figurine representing your character closer to whatever represents the door (maybe just a little line on a piece of paper). In the latter case, there’s nothing visual representing that—it’s just in your head and you’ll simply remember that your character is by the door.



All Rolled Up, www.allrolledup.co.uk

“Dice” is plural. If you roll only one, it’s a die. We talk about dice according to how many sides they have. So you might have a six-sided die, also called a six-sider or just a d6 (“d” for die). The more sides a die has, the more different results you can get, so sometimes different situations call for different dice. The rules will tell you what die to roll.

◆

Rolling a really good number on the dice is a “crit,” and rolling poorly is a “fumble” (or, more rarely, a “crit fail”). So on a twenty-sided die, rolling a 20 is a crit and rolling a 1 is a fumble. The game you’re playing might have special rules for crits and fumbles, or it might not. Even if it doesn’t, I bet you’ll hear your group use these terms.

◆

Different RPGs almost always have very different rules but usually make the same general assumptions—each player has a character, the GM provides the setting and the other characters in the world, and so on.

◆

Someone who focuses their time in the game on making their character more and more powerful is referred to as a “power gamer.” Some people see this as a derogatory term, but a player should have their fun however they want as long as it doesn’t harm someone else’s fun. Similarly, someone who is a real stickler for the rules as written (sometimes abbreviated RAW) is called a “rules lawyer.” When this label is used, it’s almost always pejorative, because the implication is that such a person is ruining the story or spoiling the fun of others by stopping the flow of the game to correct rules mistakes.

There are two broad elements of roleplaying game products: one is the rules, and the other is the story and setting. Casually, gamers call these things “crunch” and “fluff,” respectively. The more complex the game’s rules, the “crunchier” it is. Some players enjoy the crunch better, and others prefer the fluff, but most understand that every game needs some of both.



If all the player characters die in the game, this is called a TPK, which stands for “total party kill.” It’s usually a bad thing because it means that the game’s over, but in certain situations, like a horror game, it can be a dark but appropriate end to the story.



Lots of video game terms have crept into tabletop RPG discussions. We talk about loot drops, boss monsters, aggro, and so on. If these terms are not familiar to you, just ignore them.

The Value of Play

by Eric Campbell

There is a vital essence to tabletop gaming that nourishes the soul in subtle, profound ways. Each time you and your fellow players gather to tell a tale, you are engaging in the act of play.

To me, there’s almost nothing more vital for a human being to practice. The act of play liberates us from anxieties. We cease to think about how “stupid” or “unattractive” we think we are and focus instead on the imaginary circumstance that is being crafted before us. While it may look and sound completely different, the act of crafting this narrative with friends is no different and no less pure than when you were a child playing tag in the schoolyard. To craft a story with friends is not only an act of courage but a constant affirmation of your trust in each other. And the best part of all is that it comes naturally to each of us. All you must do is commit to the spirit of play.

When a group is committed to the act of play, each player’s experience becomes the priority. Behind the curtain of the mind’s eye, there is a silent dedication taking place. We are dedicating ourselves to one another, eager to find out what will happen next and what our fellow players will craft with us. We are social creatures with stories to share. And just like dancers learning the steps to their routine, gaming functions as a form that we gamers can use to find freedom within. By

trusting one another, working out our differences, and learning how to move the story forward, collaborate, and live in these beautiful worlds, we are, in fact, crafting a better heart for us to live by. A better way for us to experience each other by learning what it means to really pay attention, to really listen, to truly give ourselves away.

Play is an act of defiance. It is a refusal to allow mediocrity into our lives, strengthening our bonds to each other and empowering our dreams. In my time working in New Media, I’ve met everyone from reluctant parents to celebrities who were hesitant to roll dice and game. The reluctance is always short-lived for these very reasons.

I’m saying all this because if there’s one thing I want to drive home to anyone who may be reading this, it’s that gaming with friends is never foolish or a waste of time. I spent years feeling shame for loving something that seemed so empty to other people. There were many times in my life, many relationships, many circumstances, when I was made to feel stupid for how much I love gaming. But when I began to see gaming for what is, I started seeing the irony in the criticism I was getting. I began to appreciate that the judgment was coming from people who had lost their sense of play. I realized childishness wasn’t being childlike—it was denying the inner child. Play.

CHAPTER 2: UNDERSTANDING RPGs

If you're reading this book, you almost certainly already "get" roleplaying games. You've already played, or you've read through your first game rulebook. Or maybe you've watched other people play a game in person or online. Regardless, let's examine RPGs more closely.

WHY PLAY?

Roleplaying games are fun. That's the primary reason to play any game. But let's consider, just for a moment, how valuable RPGs are, specifically because of the things that make them unique.

I'm going to come back to this statement again and again, but RPGs are games about talking. You play the game by talking. The communication skills developed and honed by playing an RPG can't be overestimated. The ability to describe a scene or an action in a way that other people can easily understand will always come in handy as a life skill. Plus, RPGs teach you how to make a case for something you believe in, using reason and persuasion, whether you're convincing the other players to help you in a dangerous situation or you're convincing the GM not to kill your character.

And obviously, they are exercises of our imaginations. Roleplaying games take us out of our regular world and our regular lives for a few hours, and this is a great escape, but it also works the mental muscle that allows us to envision a different (better? worse?) world and come up with responses to situations that we'd never face in real life (thank goodness). RPGs allow us to look at a situation, think about what we'd do in that situation, and use logic to determine what's likely going to happen next. Through this blending of imagination and practical thinking, we develop the ability to make plans for the future, whether that be short term or long term.

The ability to honestly take on a role—look at the world (even a fictional world) from someone else's point of view—is extraordinarily valuable. Not everyone can or will do this, but roleplayers do it regularly, without even thinking.

Roleplaying games teach us countless other skills. And no, I don't mean Perception or Diplomacy. I mean things like problem solving—or even better, group problem solving. That thing you do in a game, where you figure out what everyone's strengths and weaknesses are and then use that information to formulate a plan to overcome an obstacle? Turns out you'll use that in almost any job you'll ever have, probably on a daily basis.

Most games encourage us to be comfortable with math—math you can use in your daily life, like understanding probabilities. Again, this sounds basic, but the ability to understand the difference in likelihood of something happening if you roll a 20 on a twenty-sided die versus rolling above a 15 on that same die is valuable, and not everyone understands that kind of thing.

Roleplaying games require a decent level of reading for comprehension. Which is great for all of us, but perhaps in particular a great skill for younger kids to learn. And while we're thinking about kids, let's not forget that RPGs teach kids how to help one another, work in a group, learn math, communicate, and appreciate structure. So don't just play RPGs yourself—teach your kids how to play too!



THREE ENTITIES

There are three entities at the game table: the game master (GM), the players (as a whole), and the rules. The play style (and perhaps the game you're playing) determines which of these entities has the most authority when it comes to making a story. For example, take a situation where the players of a medieval fantasy game want to invent gunpowder to blast their foes. The GM isn't sure that that kind of metagaming is kosher, but quietly thinks it would make for a good story. However, the rules don't say anything at all about gunpowder. Who wins? The players and their desire? The GM and their trepidation? The rules' lack of content (perhaps suggesting that gunpowder doesn't or shouldn't exist)? The group needs to decide what entity has final authority.

If it's the GM, then the rules are probably just a guideline, and you might go a whole session without cracking a book while the GM arbitrates the rules as they see fit.

If it's the players, then it is likely a matter of consensus. If something feels like it should be a certain way, the players will discuss it and determine how the game should proceed regardless of what the rules say. At this table, the players may even have the authority to alter the setting through some form of narrative control. "Let's say my character is from a planet called Mirridan, and it's very mountainous, so I'm skilled in climbing," a player might say. Or "I think the floorboards beneath the monster's feet give way due to its weight."

And if the rules are the authority, that means both the GM and the players agree to go by what the rulebook says in every case. There will probably be a fair bit of time spent at the table consulting the book(s) involved. Neither the GM nor the players can countermand the rules as written.

Most game groups will be some combination of these options. That is to say, one of the three isn't absolute over the other two, but rather a

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS OF THE THREE ENTITIES



group's authority might be something more like 50% GM, 30% players, and 20% rules. In this case, the GM has the final say, but the players have more authority than the rules (but the rules aren't 0% either). Compare that with something more like 30% GM, 30% players, and 40% rules, where the rules as written are important, but everyone at the table can come together and overrule what the book says.

Every group is different, and even within the same group, these relationships might change if a different ruleset is used in a new campaign. It's also possible that the percentages might evolve over time. A new GM might defer to the rules heavily at first, but as they gain confidence and experience, they take more and more authority over the rules.

In the end, there is no right or wrong way, but everyone's likely to be happier each game night if the decision is made deliberately and maintained consistently. Letting the GM trump the rules one week and doing the opposite the next week will put a lot of stress on the workability of the game group because of the uncertainty. No one's going to know what will be true from week to week.

STYLES OF ROLEPLAYING GAMES

Even if you've figured out what roleplaying games are, you will likely realize very quickly that there are different kinds of games. Now, while it's true that there are science fiction games, fantasy games, mystery

Asking the Game Designer/Publisher Rules Questions

Sometimes, a rule isn't clear or you can't find the answer you need after going through the whole rulebook. You wonder how something is supposed to work. Why not go to the source? The designer is probably on social media, and the publisher almost certainly has some way for customers to contact them with customer service issues. Why not ask them your rules question?

I'm going to be brutally honest. This is a huge waste of time. It's a waste because it's based on an underlying assumption that the RPG, like chess or baseball, has a very specific way it's supposed to be played, and playing it any other way is wrong. But that's not how RPGs work. In fact, it's just the opposite. They're meant to be flexible with room for personal interpretation and customization (usually called "house rules"). This is because you and your game group are a much better judge of what would be most fun for you than a stranger at a game publisher. Once you purchase a game, it's yours to do with as you want. There is no right answer other than what is right for you. Don't be fooled into thinking that there's something special about an official answer.

It's also unlikely that you'll get an answer you can use in time to use it. If you have an issue come up during a session, you won't get an answer in time for that session, and you very well might not get it in time for the next session either. (And of course, some publishers don't provide answers at all.) So you'd have to come up with your own answer in the meantime, and it's certainly the right one.

Actually, I'll be even more brutally honest. I've been answering rules questions for thirty years, and the vast majority of them—if I had to guess, I'd say probably 80% or so—are answered by the rules in the book. So even if you don't want to make a ruling of your own, your time is probably better spent rereading the rules in front of you than trying to contact someone at the publisher.

That said, sometimes you can get interesting insights by finding out why a designer created a game in a particular way. That information can help you in the future as you make your own house rules. The best way to get those kinds of insights is to attend a panel or similar event where the designer is speaking or to read an essay they might have written.

games, and so on, that's not what I mean. (We'll get to that later.) There are also different kinds of game rule systems—some simple, some complex, some that stress combat, and some that don't—but that's not what I'm talking about either. (And we'll get to that later too.) What I'm referring to here is a style of play. Or, to put it another way, different ideas of what kind of experience you want to have by playing the game. Just like you might sit down and play poker for fun with your pals or you might enter a high-stakes tournament and play for lots of money, there are different experiences you can get from an RPG.

It's worth stating at the outset that a lot of players feel very strongly about gaming style. They'll adopt one of the following styles (or some variation thereof) and consider the other types to be “less than” or even “wrong.” In discussions online or in real life, you'll see heated debates on the topic.

Personally, I do not adhere to this “us and them” attitude. I have played and continue to play using all of the RPG styles, and I enjoy them all. They all have strengths and weaknesses. They all have their place.

The important thing to keep in mind is that everyone in the game group should agree to the style. While you can mix some of these styles within a group, some are not entirely compatible, and some are wildly incompatible.

RPG AND CHILL

Many people like to play RPGs (and all games) in an extremely casual way. Some refer to this as “beer and pretzels” gaming, because the game is just an excuse to socialize. The snacks you bring or the pizza you order is just as important or more important than the story you're telling.

Neither the rules nor the story is particularly important. No one stresses too much about acting in character. Characters—both PCs and NPCs—often have silly names and situations are very straightforward. Kick in the door, kill the orcs, and take their treasure. The players and even the GM will spend as much time telling jokes in response to the events in the story as they will taking real actions.

Players in this kind of game generally respond to situations the way *they* would respond rather than worrying about what their character would do. Occasionally, they'll do something over the top instead just because it's funny.

Someone who is invested in creating a deep character or telling a meaningful story will be unhappy in a group that enjoys this gaming style.

BY THE BOOK

Some people really get into the rules of an RPG. They look at any situation that arises as a fun, tactical challenge, and by using the options afforded to them by the rules, they can succeed or fail at overcoming it. The game is almost like a puzzle in that way. These players are very serious about the rules, and determining exactly what is (and isn't) in the rulebook is an important part of play. The group probably enjoys a robust, perhaps even complex ruleset that has a lot of meaty detail.

This type of game is the most like playing a board game, because while it is still far more open ended than a board game, it has clearly defined boundaries. There's a reliable consistency to this kind of game and a built-in arbiter of fairness and balance (the rules themselves).

It's entirely possible to have deep characters and great stories using this style, but you'll often find that people drawn to it aren't as interested in that kind of thing (although there are plenty of exceptions). The only players who will find this style unsatisfying are those who feel constrained by (or bored by) referencing, discussing, and following the rules. If you're playing solely for the story or the funny quips, and not for the rules, a group focused on this style is not for you.

RULINGS, NOT RULES

Some people enjoy dealing with the challenges that arise in an RPG, but they don't want to have to refer to (or memorize) a thick tome of rules. So rather than relying heavily on rules, the group relies on the rulings made by the GM. When the PCs want to build a catapult, no



one cracks open a rulebook (and frankly, the rules systems favored by this kind of group most likely don't contain rules for building a catapult anyway). Instead, they turn to the GM, who comes up with what seems reasonable.

As long as the group trusts the GM to be fair and make rulings that will keep the game fun—and that's a position that every group is better off reaching no matter what play style you use—this type of game runs smoothly.

GMs of these groups get used to making off-the-cuff rulings, based on an understanding of the game's rules but also on what's fun. That means these kinds of games are often slightly more impromptu or ad-libbed. The GM may not have laboriously drawn up challenges and foes with stats carefully checked against the rules. Further, the GM is probably more ready to deal with surprising choices made by the players.

Players, then, are encouraged to come up with unique and creative solutions to problems that sometimes live outside the rules. Rather than using the combat system to attack a foe, the PCs might try to lure it into a trap or dig a tunnel to go underneath it, for example.

Thus, sometimes, games of this type also focus more on player skill than on character skill. When you face a problem like how to sneak into a guarded castle, the ingenuity of the ideas the players come up with likely matters much more than whatever special abilities or skills the PCs have on their character sheets.

That said, you can absolutely create a deep and gripping story with great characters in this type of game if you want to.

STORY FIRST

In a game that's about storytelling, it shouldn't be surprising that some people want to focus solely on the story aspect of play. For them, the rules are at best a necessary evil that facilitates the experience of group storytelling. These players might go through a whole session without rolling a die as they play out an in-depth scene of intrigue and discussion among the PCs and some NPCs, or as they research the history of an important location by reading in a library or interviewing knowledgeable people.

That doesn't mean that a Story First game can't have action. Sometimes they have epic action, dealing with matters so big that most deeply detailed RPG rules often can't handle them well—battles with thousands of combatants, crumbling mountain ranges, or swaying the minds of huge crowds of people with stirring words. A Story First GM might resolve these kinds of colossal events with a single die roll because for the group, the rules don't matter that much, and intricate or complex rules just get in the way and slow things down, taking away from, rather than adding to, the story. Even in a normal encounter—the kind that happens in games all the time—the players and GM probably aren't that interested in weighing the benefits of one tactic over another

mechanically, or the precise mechanics and parameters of a character ability as detailed in the rulebook. They're more likely to take the flavor of such things and narratively adapt it to the situation at hand.

In a Story First game, not only does the GM likely have more narrative power than usual, but often the players do as well. Players can suggest or even (to some degree) dictate events in the game in the name of creating a great story.

Someone who wants to focus on the rules as written is not going to enjoy this type of group. However, the players in a Rulings, Not Rules game could migrate to a Story First game quite easily, as long as they're willing to give not only the GM but also the players some leeway.



FUN FIRST

Perhaps the most flexible of the group types are those that shift back and forth, from session to session or even within a single session, between the various extremes. One session might be a lengthy tactical combat encounter with careful positioning of every character and precise readings of each character ability used, while the next might barely involve any mechanics as everyone focuses purely on the story, with the GM making rulings without ever looking at a rulebook. The focus here is on what the group thinks is fun in that moment.

This is difficult to manage, because everyone's got to be flexible and able to get on the same page. If someone wants to focus on the rules while everyone else just wants to do silly things for a few laughs, that will make for a difficult session. Typically, this is a style used by groups who have been together for a very long time, with players who know each other very well.

COMPLEX VERSUS SIMPLE GAMES

Different game systems appeal to different groups. An RPG and Chill group probably won't enjoy a really complex system, and neither will a Story First group. A By the Book group might get bored with a very streamlined system.

That's why games run the gamut between complex and simple. In some corners, these terms carry judgments—complex games are seen as bad and simple ones are seen as good. But the words shouldn't be saddled with those meanings, because everyone has their own preferences and there's nothing wrong with that.

It's better, probably, to consider the strengths and weaknesses of complexity (or lack thereof) and look at games as fitting on a spectrum between two extremes: intricate complexity and practically rules free.

The more complex a game system, the more different ways it offers to interact with the rules. One combat encounter can feel very different from another because the specific situation brings in different rules. The

game can be seen as having “subsystems” for different situations, each in depth in its own way. For example, a game might have a psionics subsystem for mental powers, a melee combat subsystem for hand-to-hand fighting, and a diplomatic interaction subsystem, and each works at least slightly differently because different kinds of situations are being modeled. Player choice of action will really matter in such a system, because one set of mechanics might be much more beneficial than another for the specific situation at hand. The system might be thought of as robust, with different rules and subsystems interacting to create new experiences. The rules themselves give rise to game situations that occur at the table. For example, a system that tracks whether a weapon breaks might indicate that your spear breaks right as you’re about to vanquish a foe, changing the whole session and possibly the whole story.

On the flip side, the more complex a system, the longer it typically takes to resolve an action. This comes partly from more referencing of the rulebook, and partly because the much larger number of options make player decisions harder (and probably slower), but in addition, often times the procedures themselves take longer. Resolving an action in a complex game might involve multiple die rolls, multiple decision points, and different repercussions based on both.

Less complex systems allow the game to move along quickly. You’ll likely play through far more encounters or scenes in a given session. Simpler systems are also less likely to overwhelm players and GMs with a lot of rules to manage and remember. A less complex game can be thought of as more casual, or one that allows the rules to “get out of the way” so the group can focus more on character and story. Character creation and GM prep with a less complex system are usually much faster and easier, so you’ll be ready to start playing the game more quickly.

Many gamers find that a game that falls in the middle of the spectrum is right for them, because it likely offers some robustness without sacrificing too much in terms of speed or ease.

You’ll notice that nowhere in this discussion have I used the word “realistic.” People sometimes tout complex games as being more realistic or simulating reality better. This can be true, but just as often, it’s not. This is in part because no game ever gets very realistic, and in part because complexity often becomes very “game-y,” with lots of fun tables to roll on or weird subsystems to use, but these things don’t contribute to realism. In fact, sometimes fewer and simpler rules, with more narrative control in the hands of a GM using logic, can simulate reality better than a complex set of rules that invariably produce weird corner cases or odd loopholes.

Plus, some games (and some gamers) don’t really try to simulate reality. They might simulate a specific movie, book, genre, or experience, which might not be at all realistic. If you’re playing a game with flying, fire-breathing dragons or telepathic aliens, you need to ask yourself how much realism will enhance your experience in the first place.



GENRES OF RPGs

As I mentioned earlier, there are many different genres of roleplaying games. While a lot of the choice between genres is just personal preference, it's worth considering that each offers different experiences and probably different play styles.

Most game systems have a genre built in, but there are also so-called “generic” systems that can be used as the engine behind any genre the group wants to try. The former is good because the game system is tailored for the feel and play of the genre. The latter is good because sometimes you really like a single system and want to use it for everything, and you don't want to have to keep learning a new system every time you switch genres.

FANTASY GAMES

The first roleplaying game was a fantasy game. So was the second. For many people, RPGs are synonymous with fantasy, and they can't imagine playing a game without elves and wizards. Fantasy games allow you to play out epic quests in the manner of *The Lord of the Rings* or have gritty sword and sorcery adventures like Conan. The mixture of fantasy peoples (humans, elves, dwarves, etc.) and archetypes (warriors, wizards, thieves, etc.) works extremely well in the context of a group of very different PCs cooperating toward a goal.

One of the biggest strengths of fantasy games—in fact, I might argue that this is why fantasy is and will always be the most popular genre—is that they don't have to be at all realistic. You can have literally anything happen at any time in a fantasy game if you want, and you can simply explain it away with magic. You don't need any special knowledge to run or play in a fantasy game beyond what you heard in a fairy tale when you were young. Science, economics, politics—these things can be reflected accurately and intricately in a fantasy game, but they don't have to be and the game will still be fun.

Magic is at the heart of the fantasy genre, filling it with wonder, incredible challenges, weird monsters, and strange settings like floating

castles and upside-down mountain ranges. Because of the granddaddy of fantasy games, Dungeons & Dragons, most fantasy games involve (at least potentially) exploring underground dungeons filled with monsters and treasure.

SCIENCE FICTION GAMES

Science fiction can cover many things, including space exploration, post-apocalyptic settings, cyberpunk, steampunk, and far-future space opera. The genre is so broad that it's difficult to discuss it meaningfully as a single thing.

Science fiction games often have exploration as a theme, as in exploring alien worlds, other dimensions, or maybe an Earth ravaged by nuclear war. Technology, obviously, is a major factor in the same way that magic is the linchpin of fantasy. You'll likely have a character who has the skills to fix a sensor array, and you'll have to do it in an exciting and stressful situation.

Another theme that comes up in science fiction games is humanity. That is, what it means to be human or not human. While fantasy has elves and orcs, science fiction nonhuman species are typically more than just humans with pointy ears. Player characters might be strange amorphous blobs or androids or living energy beings.

Science fiction games, particularly hard science fiction games or near-future games, require at least a little bit of knowledge or research. Obviously, some science will come up, and as a player or (especially) as a GM, you're going to need to know a little about the basics of astronomy, physics, or maybe computer technology. You don't have to be a scientist, but you at least need to have read or watched a fair bit of sci fi. Your science doesn't have to be spot-on accurate, but it must be believable.

You might be called upon to have other knowledge as well—perhaps a little economics or a little understanding of the law, should you want to use either in the game. You can handwave practically anything in fantasy, but in hard sci fi it needs to at least somewhat reflect the real, modern world, because that's what science fiction does.

For space opera games where the PCs are fighting tentacled aliens on a brand-new weird planet every week, this probably isn't true. Such wild and wooly sci fi games enjoy the same advantages as fantasy games.

HORROR GAMES

We love horror movies or roller coasters—we like being scared, as long as it's in a safe place. Horror RPGs work on the same principle. It's fun to tell creepy stories with your friends and even get a little scared doing it.

Horror's huge advantage is that the emotions it evokes are visceral. It's probably easier for a game to scare you than to deeply move you or make you cry. Fear is just easier to access for most people. (The only thing easier is probably getting you to laugh.) Horror also allows people to explore dark themes in a safe way. Just be sure that everyone is comfortable with whatever is being introduced into the game.

Horror games typically have PCs who are normal people. All the better to be terrified when faced with a supernatural entity like a ghost or a seemingly unkillable axe-wielding maniac. However, some games let the PCs have (or eventually develop) supernatural abilities like psychic powers or magic spells. And some allow the players to have characters who are monsters themselves, like vampires or werewolves.

Lots of people use horror games as one-shots or very short campaigns (see page 24 for more information), but some groups have long-running horror campaigns. It's challenging to constantly come up with things to terrify the same group of characters session after session.

SUPERHERO GAMES

Some players enjoy power fantasies, and there's nothing wrong with that. Being able to fly, throw a bulldozer, or reshape matter would be lots of fun, and that's exactly what characters in superhero games can do.

Most such games allow you to replicate your favorite comic book hero (or villain) or make up your own character with your own strange

powers. Many embrace the idea that you're modeling comic book stories and storytelling, comic book sensibilities, and even comic book physics. Anything's possible, and plots can be as simple as "catch the bank robbers and haul them to jail" or as complex as those in any other genre.

MODERN GAMES

Just as there are plenty of good action or mystery stories set right here on present-day Earth, so too can you have a great time playing an RPG set today.

The big advantage of using a modern-day setting is that it's one we all know and understand. Your characters likely know what you know (and possibly more), and the options they have are typically familiar to you as well. You don't have to ask whether you can call the police or how it works—you can just do it.

But sometimes playing in a modern game requires knowledge you don't have. What happens when you pull the fire alarm in a skyscraper? Do the elevators still work? How long does it take for the authorities to arrive? The nice thing is, as with science fiction games, you just have to make it believable, not entirely accurate.

HISTORICAL GAMES

You can set a game in any time period. The London of Sherlock Holmes? Sure. The France of the Three Musketeers? Absolutely. The Old West, Feudal Japan, World War II, and more—history offers a plethora of opportunities for interesting settings and stories.

Of any of the genres mentioned here, historical games probably require the *most* knowledge. Fortunately, there are great reference books and websites out there for you to draw upon. Don't use history as an excuse to put a lot of restrictions on what characters are viable, however. If a player wants to play a female military officer in a time when there weren't any, the group should work together to make that story possible.

A MILLION OTHER GENRES

Romance. Mystery. Noir. Post-apocalyptic dinosaur time travel. RPGs can be anything. They're limited only by our imaginations.

And, of course, some games mix and match genres. Cyberpunk but with magic. Horror in Elizabethan England. A dimensional rift that smashes space opera and classic fantasy and whatever else all together at once.

Style Versus Genre

Sometimes, two different RPGs have the same genre but take very different approaches. You could, for example, have one fantasy game that is very gritty and feels like a Conan novel, and a different fantasy game where the system makes things cinematic and epic, like one of the *Lord of the Rings* movies. You could have one horror game where the PCs are practically powerless and need to run from the danger, and another where the characters are tough enough to fight back against the monsters they encounter.

Different games try to represent not only different genres but also different styles. This is similar to game complexity, but that's only correlational. What's really in question here is: which details are important in the game? Does the game make the players keep track of the weight of everything their characters are carrying, or is that level of detail unimportant? If a character wants to swing on a chandelier across the room, is it necessary to check to see if it can hold their weight, or is that ignored because the action is so cool?

Sometimes, a game will attempt to be more cinematic, which often means that characters can accomplish visually interesting but probably unlikely or impossible things, while ignoring anything that detracts from the game's fast pace. Sometimes, a game will be more like a comic book or pulp adventure, meaning that the rules might involve science or physics but not care about accuracy in either.

As with everything else, there are no right or wrong choices. It's just another way to judge a game as it relates to giving you the experience you want to have at the table.

ONE-SHOTS VERSUS CAMPAIGNS

One of the big differences from game to game is how long each takes to play. If you play the whole game—create the whole story—in one session, this is called a one-shot. (Confusingly, sometimes a game will last two or even three sessions, and it's still called a one-shot, but the implication is always that it's a single short story.) If you play longer than that, particularly if the game has multiple stories either in succession or woven together, you call the game a campaign.

ONE-SHOTS

A one-shot game is what a short story is to fiction. There's typically one thing to do—one objective, one obstacle—and a clear end point. Explore the haunted house. Get this shipment of grain to the starving colony on another planet. Find and catch the killer.

To play a one-shot, the players show up with a character, and it's probably one they just created. The GM has a simple, short scenario, and you play through it usually in three to four hours.

One-shots are great for dabbling. If you want to try a new game system, a new genre, or even a new group or GM, a one-shot game is usually the best way to do it. One-shots are the kind of games played at game conventions.

CAMPAIGNS

A one-shot could be thought of as a movie, and a campaign as a television series. Multiple sessions allow for a continuing story, or even a series of stories, set in the same world involving the same characters. Campaigns allow for bigger stories than one-shots, but perhaps most important, they allow for characters to grow and develop over time. Your starting character might be little more than a peasant with a hand-me-down sword, but by the end of the campaign, they are a noble with a family and a small castle, wielding skills and powers that enable them to take on a whole army by themselves.

In a campaign, sometimes multiple plotlines weave together. You might be on the trail of an evil cult, then suddenly find yourself embroiled in a story involving a ghost that must be put to rest. Stories can also be successive. You might finally put an end to that cult and their plans, but that doesn't have to mean the campaign is over. Perhaps there's more that needs doing, loose ends to tie up, or a whole new plotline that the GM has been teasing with hints and clues even as you finished the last one. And because campaigns are long term, failure doesn't mean the story ends. The villain might get the best of you, but there's always next session to come back and set things right.

To play in a campaign, players create a character, and then the character advances over the course of the game, improving and becoming more powerful or capable. The GM has prepared the makings of a story (at least the beginning of one), but further preparation will likely be ongoing.

Campaigns can be long or short. Some people play the same campaign for years. There is no set length—whatever works for the group and the stories being told.

For (a lot) more detail on running a campaign, see Chapter 11: Running the Game, page 127.

FINDING A GAME GROUP IF YOU'RE AN EXPERIENCED PLAYER

In the previous chapter, we covered how a new player might find a group. But sometimes veteran players find themselves without a group as well. Your existing group broke up. You've just moved to a new city. You left your previous group because it wasn't a good fit. You gave up playing RPGs a while back, but now you want to get back into the hobby. There are many ways in which an experienced player can find themselves without a group to play with. Moving on to a new group—which in many ways may feel like starting over from scratch—can be daunting.

Game Store: Your first stop should be your local game store, if you have one. Many great game shops host games right in the store, and





they're almost always looking for new players to join in. As sellers of games, they want to promote the playing of games in any way they can, because you can't sell games unless people play them. These groups typically are willing to teach game systems if you're not familiar with them, and are welcoming to new players. Of course, you have no control over who is in the group or who's running the game, so it might not always be a good fit. It's a little like going on a blind date. But even blind dates that don't turn into a relationship can be fun. Further, if you meet even one player in the group that you'd like to continue gaming with, chances are that person might have another game group or would be willing to join you for a game away from the store.

If the store's not hosting a session of your favorite game, you can volunteer to organize one at the store yourself. It almost certainly means you'll have to run the game, but doing so will not only introduce you to new gamers but also get you in good with the store employees, which is never a bad thing.

Last, even stores that don't host games directly may have a bulletin board where they post announcements of players looking for a game or a game looking for players. Or an employee of the store might be able to give you direct recommendations. Maybe they run a game at home or would be interested in playing a game you're trying to put together.

Game Convention: Local game conventions are an interesting way to meet new people who are in your area and like the same things you do. The best strategy here is to volunteer to run a game at the convention, which is much like hanging up an advertisement that says, "Who wants to play my favorite game with me?" If that's not your style, sign up to play a game you love or have been interested in trying. Either way, if you enjoy playing the game, try to strike up a conversation with some of the players or the GM and see if any of them have a group you could join.

Finding a Group Online: There are sites like [meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com) that exist to match up people of common interests, and RPG players are no exception. A brief search will likely give you a number of options for RPG groups in your area looking for players. You can also check message

boards, social media groups, and similar places online and search for game groups in your area.

Playing Online: In today's world, with all manner of ways to communicate using the webcam on your computer, you can play an RPG online. One of the most exciting things about this development is that even if your old group of gamer friends can't be together anymore because you've all moved away (perhaps you played a game in college, but now you've all graduated), you can still game together online.

You can also join people you know only through the internet and play RPGs with them. This is particularly true if you're part of an online community that discusses games. You can ask a few other participants that you enjoy interacting with to play in a game.

For more on online gaming, see page 212.

Your Family and Friends: The best way to find a game group is to create one. Think about each of your friends. Even if they don't play RPGs, anyone who is creative or smart, likes stories, or just likes new challenges could be an easy convert to giving a roleplaying game a try.

Of course, if you're a parent, you've also created a potential game group right in your own home. Playing with your kids can be a great family game night, and with help, kids as young as 5 or 6 can play very short, very light-hearted sessions. There are even games tailored to young kids or families with kids of different ages.

FINDING OR CREATING THE RIGHT GROUP

Finding a game group is only half the story. It's not enough to find a few other people who also want to play RPGs. It's important to find the *right* group. That's not a statement of elitism, but an acknowledgment that not every roleplayer's needs are the same. Some people want everything to be casual, while others get really involved. Some people love the rules, and some are there only for the story. There's no right or wrong, but you should find a group with similar ideas of what they want to get out of the experience.

This is so vitally important because unlike many other hobbies—even those that you also do in groups—roleplaying games are a *social* experience. Their very nature is about interaction and conversation. The entire activity is just talking to other people (and rolling the occasional die) for a whole evening.

Your game group is made of the people you will spend hours in the same room with on a regular basis. You'll watch as they take on the roles of imaginary people and make decisions, and you'll do the same thing in front of them. You need to be able to make mistakes in front of them, and you need to be okay when they make mistakes. This is a group of people that you will make plans with and see (and live with, at least in the fictional world) the outcomes of those decisions. You will create stories with these people.

This may seem like a silly statement to make at first blush, but you should *like* the people you play games with. You don't want to play an RPG with someone you wouldn't invite to join you for dinner. If you couldn't imagine sitting down at a meal with that person and talking for an hour or two, you probably shouldn't try to spend an afternoon or evening with them talking at a game table.

A COMFORTABLE SPACE

When you sit down to play an RPG with a group of people, you are—at least a little bit—opening up parts of yourself that you might not otherwise do. If the GM says, “You're surrounded by men with guns who want to kill you, so what do you do?” or “There's a person hanging on to the edge of the cliff by his fingertips—do you help him or keep walking?” you have to consider those situations and then say your answers out loud. Sure, you're roleplaying your character, so the action you assign to that character might not be what *you* would do in the real world, but it's still a part of you. It's still you saying it, and you who made that decision. Therefore, it requires that you have a safe space to do it in. If you think that people will laugh at you or judge you or get an insight into you that you don't want to provide, that's not good. A situation like that will either

force you into a position where you can't play the game the way you want, or make you ultimately unhappy. And obviously, that's not why we play games.

Roleplaying—even very casual roleplaying—involves exposing our inner selves a little bit. That's one of the things that some people find so daunting about it, even if they don't fully realize it and instead say it's “weird.” You need a group willing to grant you a comfortable space to roleplay and create stories with them. Everyone's a little vulnerable when playing an RPG, so the group has to do what it can to make everyone comfortable while this happens. No judgment and no mockery.

This is even more true for people who are shy or introverted. A strong, extroverted personality can make almost any space comfortable for them, but someone who's already quiet or avoids revealing much of themselves to others needs a group that will go the extra mile to be a comfortable place for them to open up, express opinions, and play their role. That might mean prompting them with questions and making sure they don't get bowled over by more extroverted players. It might mean that it takes a while, with everyone else at the table making it clear that it's okay to be a little vulnerable or open, and not mocking or talking over anyone when they do so.

One way to look at it is this: no one should have to make a space for themselves. They should be given that space by the group. If one player loves being dramatic and loud while playing their character and that works within the context of the group, the group needs to give that player the freedom and acceptance to do so. They have to pause for a moment while the character makes an impassioned speech before the duchess, and be accepting of the flowery speech and wild gesticulations. If another player is shy and doesn't express themselves unless asked, someone in the group needs to ask them to share. If a third player is a bit quiet and gets anxious when confronted about it, no one in the group should confront them, and everyone should let them play the game the way they want. That's what giving someone a comfortable space is all about.

What this means is you must find a group willing to learn and adapt to the needs of each player. In the same way that a group with a player in a wheelchair should be sure that the game room is comfortable and accessible for them, a good group must recognize that every player will have some kind of need in order to be comfortable, either physically or emotionally or both. As a part of that group, you must discover the kind of space each of your fellow players needs and help provide that space, and if you see someone doing something—intentionally or inadvertently—that encroaches on that space, you need to advise them to stop.

A SAFE SPACE

Your game group needs to make you feel safe. This is a step beyond just being comfortable while playing the game. This is a safe space free of hassle, harassment, negativity, judgment, and unfriendly behavior in general, both in and out of the game. You should never have to be worried or anxious at the game table (unless it's because you've only got 4 hit points left and the dragon is getting ready to breathe fire again). No one should have to worry about real-life situations, drama, or intimidating or obnoxious behavior. Particularly while you're taking a break, talking about something other than your character's actions, or packing up your stuff to go home, you want to be surrounded by people who make you feel welcome and safe.

A lot of what I'm referring to here has less to do with how people play the game and more about how we interact as humans. However, some of what we do in RPGs makes interacting with each other a bit more challenging, or at least exposes us to situations we wouldn't face in other contexts.

You need to be able to be casual around the other people in your game group. If you always have to keep your guard up or worry about what someone will say, it's hard to have fun. You need the freedom to tell jokes and say silly things (because, of course, those things are a big part of RPGs). At the same time, you have to feel that no one will



say something that makes you uncomfortable. We need to be willing to realize that people make mistakes, just like we want them to handle our own mistakes gracefully, but I'm referring to more than just a rare, insensitive gaffe. Sometimes, a person in a game group may hold different beliefs than you do, just like in any group of people. And, just like in other aspects of our lives, some of those beliefs might be downright offensive or make you feel unsafe.

And no RPG is worth that.

There's a strange zone where things that happen in the game bleed into real life and vice versa. Games are social experiences, but because of this, they can create social confusion as well. Is the person across the table having their character flirt with your character? Great, but don't assume that means the actual person is flirting with *you*. Is that person's character angry with your character, drawing their sword and preparing to attack? Okay, but that doesn't mean the actual person is angry with you. Or, if it does, then things have gone horribly wrong and you should

pause the game right there. No one should ever, ever try to use character actions to resolve or express real emotions.

You might talk about things in the context of your game—sex, violence, religion, strong emotions, revenge, discrimination, acceptance, romance, family, values, principles—that you wouldn't talk much about otherwise. You might avoid the topic of morality when talking to your friends, but then, lo and behold, a moral quandary arises in the roleplaying game. You don't want to do that in a group where things might get uncomfortable, awkward, or unpleasant. This is a game, and we play it for fun. If someone in your group expresses beliefs that you find abhorrent and you can't find a way to easily resolve the issue in a friendly manner, that's not the right group for you (or, perhaps, for them).

We don't like to talk about this kind of thing. We want to assume that we'll all get along. We all love dragons, spaceships, or telling stories, and we want to think that means we're all cut from the same cloth. And

sometimes those things do create wonderful and empowering bridges between us. But not always.

And, just as in any situation, if you find yourself feeling threatened or in danger in any way, leave. Tell another player. Both.

THE IDEAL GAME GROUP

Perhaps a better way to approach this topic is from the positive angle. Let's consider what we *should* do rather than what we *shouldn't*. The ideal game group is:

- ☞ Welcoming to any roleplayer regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, age, ability, personal issues, economic status, religious beliefs, or political beliefs. In other words, inclusive and friendly to everyone.
- ☞ Sensitive to the concerns of every member of the group, and willing to address issues that arise immediately and fairly.
- ☞ Willing to create a comfortable, safe space where those involved never need to fear that they will be mocked or belittled, be discriminated against, or need to spurn unwanted advances.

To help create such a group, it starts with you. If you're welcoming, sensitive, and inclusive, you set the stage for everyone else to be that way as well. With this as your goal, be sensitive to the needs and positions of others. Be aware that something you might do or say can rub someone the wrong way, and apologize if that happens and work hard not to do or say it again. Be welcoming and open to people who think differently than you, or who are different from you.

See page 67 for more on becoming everyone's favorite player (and thus, hopefully encouraging the whole group to take on those qualities).

SAYING "NO THANK YOU"

At the same time, recognize that no group is ideal or perfect. This means that it has to be okay for people to say, "This group isn't a good fit for me," and leave. Don't take offense at that.

The Pause Button

Every game should have a pause button, and anyone at the table should be able to push it at any time. It brings the game to a halt so that a real-world situation within the group can be resolved. If one player (not a character) is angry at another player (not their character), push the pause button and resolve that issue as people at a table, not as characters. If a player is uncomfortable with events in the game or with something that another player said, push the pause button so that can be expressed and resolved. Obviously, your group doesn't need a literal button to push. It can be a word or phrase that a player says, or a card or token at the table that someone can hold up when the game needs to be paused. In any event, it needs to be something that is quickly and clearly understood by everyone at the table.

That person leaving might be you. Sometimes, you need to politely say that it's just not working out, that everyone has things they want out of an RPG and your needs don't mesh with those of the rest of the group. It doesn't have to be awkward or painful (although it can be). It can be like breaking up with someone you've been dating. "It's not you, it's me." Do your best, don't linger on it, and make your exit as gracefully as you can.

And sometimes—and this is the hardest one—the group needs to ask a member to leave. If the whole group gets along well and things are going swimmingly, but one player doesn't fit in and doesn't seem like they're going to leave on their own, the group needs to do something about it.

Before you go that route, talk to the person. Asking someone to leave is drastic and probably will be at least a little hurtful, so don't do it unless you have to. They might not be aware that what they're doing is bothering anyone. Talk about potential changes in their actions and in the group to smooth things out and make the game fun for everyone. Once they hear what you've all got to say, they might work harder to be

The Play Is the Game

by Luke Crane

Picking up a new game for the first time, we might think, “These rules are hard” or “I don’t like this part.” Those statements may well be true, but we don’t simply change queens to pawns because chess is complex and we lost a game to our younger brother. Neither should we sit down to an RPG with the assumption that we have more insight into the game than its designers.

A good game is designed thoughtfully and tested thoroughly. A team of editors, designers, and playtesters build up the best possible version of the game through many hours of playtesting.

Imagine we sit down to play *Blades in the Dark* for the first time and find the flashback rules irksome and the effect level rules confusing. For our second session, should we roll up our sleeves and gut the game, asking ourselves “What was John Harper thinking?” No. This game was precisely and intricately designed to produce a certain type of play. The problem is almost certainly in our lack of understanding. Rather than modify the game, we go back to the rules and re-examine our assumptions. What did we learn? How can we play better next time?

Going further, we don’t assume that the way we played the last game applies to the new game we’re playing. The dynamics of playing *Apocalypse World* are completely different from playing *Mutant: Year Zero*. Before we play a new game, we divest ourselves of assumptions, read the rules, and dive in with a full heart.

A good game will challenge us. It will change the way we think. It will create results that we would not have otherwise achieved without the game. Playing a party of fighters in *Dungeons & Dragons* produces different results than playing a lance of knights in *Pendragon*, even though every character is wearing armor and wielding swords.

The rules matter. Learn them. Practice them. Delve into them. Try to engage with the frame that the designer has laid out for you. In doing so, you will create moments you didn’t think possible and gain insight that makes you a better player of games overall (perhaps a better designer, too). After all, this is why we play roleplaying games: to be genuinely surprised, challenged, and delighted in a manner that no other type of game can reproduce. But we can get there only if we play the game.

part of the group. But if they don’t, just be honest with them. Tell them that the way they like to play, the kinds of experiences they want to have, or their general behavior isn’t mixing well with the rest of you. Maybe come into the conversation with a suggestion for another group they could join, or tips on how to find one. Try to be as tactful as you can, but don’t allow one person to ruin or diminish everyone else’s fun just because no one’s got the nerve to say anything.

It’s probably best if only one or two people from the group have the discussion with the player who’s not fitting in so it doesn’t seem overwhelming or like they’re being ganged up on. Still, make it clear that the message comes from the group. And don’t assume that the GM is the one who should deal with a problem player. It’s not fair to always put this kind of thing on them.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT GAME

Not every RPG is right for all players. And that's as it should be. Different games attempt to cater to different tastes and provide different experiences. Some have complex but intriguing rules, while others are very simple, almost free-form. Some are all about combat, while others embrace interaction, puzzle solving, intrigue, or other kinds of experiences. And some try to provide a variety of things, for players who want it all.

Ironically, sometimes games are not so great at telling you what they're like to play. A game's back cover or introduction might talk about storytelling, but the game turns out to be a complex ruleset that encourages a focus on mechanics.

When going through a rulebook, a good rule of thumb is to look at the longest chapters. The topics covered there are very likely the focus of the gameplay. If combat gets the most attention and detail, there's probably going to be a lot of combat in the game. If the book lists dozens and dozens of skills with detailed descriptions, character skills will probably be a major factor. And so on.

Ask your game retailer if you're in a store. Tell them that you like such-and-such game, and they should be able to tell you what other games you might like. For example, you might say, "I like D&D, but now I'm looking for something that allows me to run a more sci fi campaign." Or "I've been playing nothing but Star Wars, and now I'm interested in checking out something very different."

Look for reviews online, or—far better—see if there are videos of people playing the game and give those a watch. You might see something that you like, or you might see a red flag that makes you want to steer clear of a particular game. Don't let the players or the GM in a video influence you, though. Try to pay attention to the game and the gameplay. All too often, you might watch a game, try it yourself, and end up disappointed because what you really wanted was that particular GM. Conversely, even if the group isn't one you'd want to play with, you can still see if the game might be something you'd enjoy.

In the end, don't be afraid of trying new games. If one isn't to your liking, there are many, many others to choose from.

GAMER LIFE AWAY FROM THE TABLE

Roleplaying games offer a number of related activities that don't directly involve playing the game at the table.

CHARACTER CREATION

With many games, even when you're not at the table, you can create your character, or create additional characters just for fun, to examine the options you didn't take when you made the character you are currently playing. Some players like to have a whole assortment of characters ready to go so that the next time they need one, they're ready.

You can also page through the rulebook and plan what character abilities you'll select next if your character advances in the game, or just dream about future glories by looking at the lists of equipment or magic items, searching for just the right thing you'd like to attain one day.

GM PREP

Although we'll examine this topic more closely later in the book, game masters can spend hours between sessions creating NPCs, designing adventures, and drawing maps. For many GMs, this is a labor of love—and for some GMs, this worldbuilding and plot weaving is the main reason they run games.

ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Almost any game you might choose to play has at least one online community (maybe dozens of them) that you can find and participate in. You'll find people there discussing their characters, asking rules questions, or describing their most recent game session. You'll find people posting their house rules or even characters or adventures they've created, which you can then use for yourself. Some people will

blog about a whole new game system they've created or offer advice, sharing their experiences with other players and GMs.

This is a great way to interact with other gamers all over the world and find out how other people are dealing with some of the same things you're dealing with, and loving the same things you're loving. It's also a way to find people who might be fun to play with in games hosted online. For more on playing tabletop games online, see page 212.

GAME STORES

If you're lucky enough to have a nearby store dedicated to games, they'll very likely have an RPG section, and if they do, you'll often find that the store isn't just a place to buy things, but a place where gaming communities are created. Many stores host games on the premises, and that's a great way to meet new players or try new games. You can also notice who else is perusing the game shelves, and if you see someone looking at a game you like, you might strike up a conversation. Who knows? Maybe they're looking for players for their game, or might be interested in joining yours.

GAME CONVENTIONS

Many cities have gatherings of game players called conventions. They usually have names like GameCon or such-and-such Con. Sometimes they're held in conjunction with conventions of science fiction and fantasy fans. Sometimes they're part of a board or card game event, and sometimes they're devoted strictly to roleplaying games. The largest game convention in the United States takes place in Indianapolis in the late summer every year. It's called GenCon, and as of this writing, it draws well over 60,000 attendees. Most conventions are much smaller than that, but all offer fun activities and cool opportunities.

Why go to a game convention? Well, it's a great place to meet new gamers, and if the convention is in your town, that means the gamers are local and might be people you want to consider gaming with regularly.

Conventions usually have a place to buy games and related products, and sometimes you'll find things you didn't even know existed. There might be panel discussions offering game advice or insights into topics you're interested in. And depending on the convention, there might be professional game designers or publishers to talk to.

THE BONDS OF FRIENDSHIP

Roleplaying games are an intensely social experience. If the people you're playing with aren't already good friends, they likely will be eventually. And it's a natural extension to do other social activities with the people you game with. If you're playing in a science fiction campaign and a cool new sci fi movie opens next weekend, make an evening of it with the whole group and then hang around afterward and talk about what you liked, what you didn't, and—perhaps best of all—how it might relate to your game. Did the villain remind you of an NPC you all encountered? Did the heroes visit a planet that would be interesting to incorporate into a future session?

The point here is not just that your RPG group is made up of your friends, but that it's a group of friends you have a set of unique shared experiences with. You can go to that sci fi movie and then discuss the sci fi adventures you all have taken part in (through your characters). When discussing the scene where the main character dropped a vital tool at just the wrong moment, you can say, "He must have rolled a 1," and everyone will know what you're referring to. In a way, the jargon of gaming becomes a sort of secret, shared language you can apply to other types of fiction, or even to real life. The next time you and your gaming friends are shooting baskets and someone puts the ball in the hoop without touching the rim, someone's going to call it a crit, and you'll all get the reference.

I can personally attest that a large percentage of the long-term friendships I've made in my life have come through playing RPGs.

DORK TOWER

BY JOHN KOVALIC



WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE STYLE OF GAME, IGOR?

OH, PROBABLY WHAT I'M PLAYING NOW.

"PANDAEMIC"?

YUP.



BUT THAT'S A COOPERATIVE BOARD GAME.

RIGHT.

LAST WEEK WHEN WE WERE ROLEPLAYING, YOU SAID THAT WAS YOUR FAVORITE.

I MAY HAVE.



AND YOU SAID COLLECTIBLE CARD GAMES WERE YOUR FAVORITE, WHEN I BROKE OUT MY DECKS!

TRUE, DAT.

AND WHEN WE WERE PLAYING "WARHAMSTER AGE OF SMEGMA," YOU SAID MINIATURES WAS YOUR FAVORITE STYLE.



RIGHT.

IGOR! THOSE ARE VASTLY DIFFERENT STYLES OF GAME! STYLISTICALLY THEY'VE ABSOLUTELY NOTHING IN COMMON!

YES, THEY DO.

AS I SAID...



I WAS PLAYING THEM, NOW!



PART 2: BEING A GREAT PLAYER



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CHAPTER 3: PLAYER BASICS

Playing in a roleplaying game is wonderful fun and a fantastic outlet for your creativity. It's better than watching a movie or reading a book because you're participating in the story. As you follow along in the tale, you get to control one of the characters and decide what they would do. In other words, you're helping to create the story itself, because without characters, there can be no story.

WHAT RPG PLAYERS DO

Players, as opposed to game masters, create and run characters. And by “run,” I mean “take on the role of.” You make all the decisions that the character would make, react to situations that the character encounters, and manage whatever game mechanics (like rolling dice or keeping track of hit points) are appropriate for that character. When it comes to your character, you are in charge. The GM doesn't get to tell you what your character does, and neither does any other player.

If you're new to RPGs, take the chapter at the beginning of this book, “So You Want to Play an RPG,” to heart. I'm going to assume that you have, and this part of the book will move forward with a more in-depth look at being a player in a roleplaying game.

THE DIFFERENT SKILLS OF AN RPG PLAYER

Playing an RPG involves many different things. You don't have to be great at all of them, but you should be aware of all of them, and find your own niche. Are you here for the story? The challenges? Playing a role dramatically? Just cooperating with your friends? It doesn't matter which you prefer, and it's fine if your answer is “all of the above.” Whatever you enjoy most about the game is very likely closely related to the skills you bring or will soon develop.

CREATIVITY

You create your character, breathing life into them. You decide what they look like, what their backstory is, what their personality is like, how they dress, what they're good at, how they speak—everything. This is a creative endeavor, to say the least. Once the game starts, you also participate in creating the story by making decisions for your character.

It doesn't matter if you've never done anything like this before. You'll understand it more and more as you go along. The more you play, the better and more interesting your character will be. The second character you create will be better than the first, and the third will be better than the second, and so on. Creativity is like most things—you get better at it with more practice and more experience. (But you'll probably always remember your first character with fondness, even years later—we almost all do.)

It also doesn't matter if you steal ideas and make them your own. If John McClane from *Die Hard* is one of your favorite characters, think of him when you face a decision and do what you think he might do. If you love Lauren Olamina from Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, take inspiration for your character's background from hers. Your character and the story you create with your friends aren't for publication, they're just for you, so no one is going to accuse you of plagiarism if you take the idea for your character from George R.R. Martin, Guillermo del Toro, or Ursula K. Le Guin. Be inspired by the creations of others that you love to create your own.

PROBLEM SOLVING

As a player, you're going to come upon situations where you have to make decisions. Some will be easy, and some will be hard. It's not always just a matter of rolling well with the dice. Your character's success in achieving their goals will also rely heavily on the solutions you come

up with for the challenges you're presented. When you broker a peace agreement between the townsfolk and the humanoid creatures that live nearby, you'll want to come up with a compelling reason for them to end their hostilities. Not your character, but you, *the player*, will be called upon to come up with that idea. When you're trying to determine the identity of the murderer in a whodunit mystery, your character's skills and knowledge will help, but ultimately *you* need to decide if you think it was the butler or not.

Problem solving is really just another kind of creativity. The more you play, the more you'll start to see that the real beauty of RPGs—which is that you can do anything you can imagine—means that you can come up with whatever response to a situation you'd like. You don't have to wonder what the game wants you to do, or what the GM expects you to do. Instead, you can come up with an idea that no one in the world but you might have thought of, implement that idea, and then see if it works.

ROLEPLAYING

It's a roleplaying game, so obviously you will do some roleplaying. You're literally pretending to be someone that you're not, like an actor onstage. How far you want to take that, however, is up to you. It's okay if your character is just a thinly veiled version of yourself and does whatever you would do in their situation. It's also okay if you deliberately play your character as someone very different who makes choices that you would never make in real life.

Does your character keep true to their word, or will they betray their friends? Do they show mercy to the weak, or are they more ruthless? Are they self-sacrificing or selfish? These are decisions that you can make at character creation, but honestly, these questions will really be answered when you're in the thick of the story. You can talk about your character being noble and altruistic all you want, but what do they do when that's put to the test? Finding out is all part of the fun.

Portraying your character, and the lengths that you go to when you do, also comes down to personal preference. Do you use a different

voice at the table when you speak for them? Do you make dramatic gestures when your character speaks to NPCs? Do you try to remain in character throughout the game session, or do you take things much more casually? Again, there are no right or wrong answers, but keep in mind that RPGs give you the opportunity to explore all sorts of new things.

TEAMWORK

RPGs are a team sport—a group activity.

You're not competing with your friends, but working with them to tell a story and overcome obstacles.

The best players, then, become very adept at teamwork. Your mechanic character repairs the ship's hyperdrive while another player's pilot character guides you through the asteroid field and the soldier character repels the alien boarding party. Everyone has a role to play, and usually only by acting in concert can the group hope to succeed. The stories you tell in RPGs aren't ones of singular heroes or lone wanderers—they are of groups of friends and allies overcoming adversity together.



CHAPTER 4: CREATING CHARACTERS

So much about being a great player is wrapped up in character creation. Your character represents you at the table. It's your primary contribution to the story. You're creating one of the main characters of the narrative you're all telling together, and the importance of great characters in great stories cannot be overstated. Imagine *Star Wars* without Luke Skywalker or *The Hobbit* without Bilbo. It's pretty difficult.



CHARACTER CREATION AS STORYTELLING

Merely by creating a character, you are telling a story, and it will add to the larger story that you and your friends will tell by playing the game. Just by assigning a few ability scores and skills to your character sheet, the story of your character takes form. Are they strong? If so, how did they get that way? Are they large and muscular, having come from a family of large and muscular people, or did they get their strength through vigorous exercise? What drove them to work out so much?

Similarly, as soon as you write down that they're skilled in geology, the question arises: where did they get that training? Did they go to school for many years, or is their knowledge all practical because they worked in a mine? Let your character choices lead you down a path to create the story of your character.

FIGURING OUT THE CONTEXT

The first thing that you need to do is learn the context for these stories. What's the genre, what's the setting, and what's going to be expected of your character? How long is the game going to be—a one-shot, a short campaign, or a long campaign? (If it's a one-shot, you probably won't want to spend a lot of time on a character backstory or a really deep personality.)

While you can create the character you want to play, you need to create one that fits into the larger context of the game. You wouldn't bring your tennis racket if someone invited you over for poker. It won't help your game, it's not being respectful of the invitation, and all the other people showed up to play cards. So if someone invites you to play an RPG, you need to bring a character—that's what players do—and more important, that character must be able to fit into whatever will happen in the game.

What does that mean? First and foremost, remember that RPGs are a group activity, so your character should have some means of working

within the confines of a group. It's okay to play a quiet character, or one who's only just now learning the importance of allies, or something like that, but if you show up at the table with a character who refuses to be part of a group, you're basically saying, "I don't want to play." It's as silly as showing up to play baseball but refusing from the get-go to touch the ball. You're effectively taking yourself out of the activity that everyone else has agreed to do.

Beyond that, though, having a character who will work with the game depends on the game, the group, and the circumstance. Some of it is straightforward—almost too silly to mention here, but you'd be surprised by some of the stories I've heard. If your group has decided to play a game set in the modern world, don't show up with an elf character. If your group is playing a fantasy game but the GM specifically said, "Don't play an elf," don't show up with an elf PC.

If your group is going to play a space opera, planet-hopping game, don't show up with a PC who hates space travel and refuses to take part in it. The exception might be a character who's afraid of space travel, but—and this is the important part—you as a player on a metagame level make it clear that you won't let your character's fear impede the game. Rather, you want them to deal with that fear as an interesting part of the story. And even then, this kind of thing should be the exception, because the real point is:

Show up at the table with a character who's eager to be part of the story.

That's the most important takeaway from this. Game-specific terminology aside, it's wrong to think of the GM as the storyteller because RPGs are a group storytelling experience. Let me say that again. *RPGs are a group storytelling experience.* That means as a player, you're one of the storytellers too. Your voice in the story is as important as anyone else's, and at the same time, no one has a greater responsibility to the story than you do. You can't show up to the table with a PC who refuses to go on adventures and insists on staying home where it's safe,

forcing the GM to come up with some impetus to get your character involved. Oh, you can have a character who needs some kind of push to get them involved in the story, but that push is your responsibility, not anyone else's. No one should have to drag you into the story, kicking and screaming.

One great thing you can do in this context is work with the other players ahead of time. Discuss your characters and figure out how they know each other before the first session starts. In romantic comedies, the moment the characters meet is called the "meet cute." The stereotypical RPG meet cute equivalent is "You all meet in a tavern." There's nothing wrong with that idea, other than that it's overused (and kind of genre specific), but regardless, don't put that onus on the GM. Unless the GM says that they're starting the first session in a way that brings the characters together, it's the players' responsibility to explain why their characters are together, or why they're going to come (and stay) together. And it's each player's responsibility to explain why their individual character will get involved. That's the player-focused storytelling responsibility of character creation.

I'll write about this more in the game mastering chapters, but I'll say here that there's nothing wrong with the GM presenting the general concept of the first scenario ("Orcs are on their way to the village," "The Andersons' son is missing," "Everyone says the old Miller place is haunted," "A plague threatens the entire space station") and then turning to each player and asking, "How is your character involved?" In fact, I think it's a great straightforward approach. A good GM will then work with each player to help the character fit into the situation nicely, perhaps with additional details specific to their perspective.



CHARACTER CREATION CHOICES

There are different ways to approach character creation. You can create a character's story first, and then design their stats and abilities based on that story. Alternatively, you can design a character who is mechanically as efficient and powerful as you want (this is often called min-maxing, because you're minimizing your weaknesses and maximizing your strengths). Or you can do something in between.

Regardless, the choices you make will define the character you play, so you want to give them some thought. None of these choices is binary—each choice you make will lie on a spectrum.

FOCUSED VERSUS JACK OF ALL TRADES

A focused character does one thing and does it really, really well. A jack of all trades does a lot of things moderately well. A jack of all trades is more self-sufficient, but compared to a focused character in their area of expertise, they will always fall short. A focused character very likely relies heavily on their friends to take care of anything that isn't in their area.

In many game systems, this choice involves picking a class, an archetype, or a profession. Of all the choices you'll make when creating your character, this one probably has the largest impact.

A few different ways to make a focused character include:

- ☛ **Warrior:** A warrior deals damage, either up close or at range. Their skills and abilities focus on weapons.
- ☛ **Tank:** A tank can take a lot of damage and keep going. They have plenty of health or endurance, and probably wear armor.
- ☛ **Sneak:** A sneak is very stealthy and quick. They succeed by not being seen, caught, or struck.
- ☛ **Face:** A face is very good at talking to people, whether through charm or deceit.
- ☛ **Specialist:** A specialist focuses on one area of knowledge, like machines, magic, or animals.

- ☛ **Shaper:** A shaper controls the area around them in some meaningful way, breaking down or passing through barriers, making things inconvenient or hostile to foes, or making things somehow beneficial to themselves.
- ☛ **Nullifier:** A nullifier deals with foes (or other dangers) by neutralizing them. They prevent foes from moving, attacking, or using their abilities.
- ☛ **Supporter:** A supporter aids, heals, or protects their allies.

Depending on the game you play, there are likely other types of focused characters as well. And of course, you can combine two or three of these ideas to have a less single-minded but still focused character. For example, you could have a sneaky warrior, or a nullifier that's also a bit of a tank.

BRAINS VERSUS BRAWN

Is your character cerebral or physical? This is probably a matter of their stats or ability scores, and perhaps their skills (depending on the game system). The choice here will direct the kinds of activities your character partakes in. Do you want to be a character who knows a lot of things or can examine something and figure it out, or do you want to be running, jumping, and fighting? Obviously, you can always do some of both, but thinking about the sorts of actions you want to focus on will help you figure out how to create your character.

If you're more brains, adjust your stats and select skills or abilities that deal with intellectual pursuits, and possibly things like perception or talking to people. If you're more brawn, focus your abilities on things that make you fast, strong, and/or tough. You should be hardy (resistant to harm) and consider mobility, combat, and overcoming physical obstacles.

FITTING THE MOLD VERSUS DEFYING EXPECTATIONS

Does your character do the expected or not? In other words, if you chose to be a brawny warrior, are you a hulking brute who uses weapons and armor? That's probably fitting the mold. Are you small and wiry, eschewing protection so you can strike with ranged attacks? That's breaking the mold a bit. Do you float in an armored hoverchair that launches missiles? That's defying expectations.

Fitting the mold almost certainly entails a more “optimized” character. In a fantasy game, if you're playing a huge troll fighter, you're probably a really good one. If you're playing a troll wizard, that's defying expectations, and you're likely taking a few penalties for breaking the mold so completely. (But it depends on the game system.)

In other words, the system has probably been designed with some assumptions. If there's a charmer or smooth talker character, the assumption might be that the character is physically attractive in a conventional way. But what if you want to play an ugly character who's been horrifically scarred in a fire, but still is really good with people? You might be able to create a character who is contrary to the game's assumptions, though they might not be utterly optimized according to the rules. But don't let that stop you, if that's what you want to do. As with the other choices, there are no right or wrong paths. In fact, if you make an interesting character who defies all expectations, your GM might waive some of the mechanical hindrances the game's assumptions put in your way. Creativity should be rewarded!

Of course, sometimes it's fun to play into an archetype as well. They're archetypes for a reason, after all. Some people might think it clichéd, but the noble knight, the wizened old mage, or the hotshot young pilot can be comfortable roles to take on, like wearing your favorite shoes.

CHARACTER PERSONALITY

You will be portraying a character who is (most likely) not you, so you'll want to know what kind of person they are. Do they take everything seriously, or are they lighthearted? Are they ruthless or merciful? Introverted or extroverted? Your character's personality will help you decide what they do in a given situation, what they say, and how they feel about things. Think about what motivates them, why they chose their profession or role, and how they feel about the other characters.

Consider asking yourself a few questions about the character as you explore all facets of their personality, such as, but not limited to:

- ☞ Who is their personal hero? Why?
- ☞ What are they most proud of? Why?
- ☞ What's their greatest fear?
- ☞ What do they like better: building or destroying?
- ☞ Are they open about their feelings?
- ☞ If someone wrongs them, are they willing to give that person another chance?
- ☞ How far would they go to help a stranger in need?
- ☞ Do they like to try new things?
- ☞ Do they fear the unknown?
- ☞ How important is money to them?
- ☞ Do they collect anything?
- ☞ If forced to choose between themselves and the group, which would they choose?

Here's the thing, though. Much of your character's personality will come out through *play*. You can make a lot of decisions ahead of time, but some of those things might change as your character advances in the story. That's okay. Stories are often about characters changing and growing because of what happens to them. Further, things are going to come up that will shape your character, things you can't predict during character creation. When you made your fantasy character, you might not have considered how they feel about magic, but once they're out

in the world, a bad experience might make you decide that it's your character's calling to eradicate sorcery wherever they find it.

CHARACTER CULTURE, GENDER, AND ETHNICITY

Everyone is influenced by their culture. In what ways did culture influence your character? This can relate to dress, food, drink, music, or any number of other things. Your character can be a product of their culture, or they can intentionally be different from their culture, but either way it requires you to think about what that culture is. Your GM might provide some details about culture, but you might have room to make it up yourself, or at least add details. Talk to the GM and look at this as a collaboration.

Character gender is entirely your choice, but recognize that it probably means more than just “male” or “female.” Sexuality, gender roles, and other issues are involved here. There should be no right or wrong choices when it comes to gender. Even if you're playing a game set at a time in history when opportunities for women were typically restricted, don't let that force you to play a character you don't want to play. Again, talk to your GM, discuss the character you want to play, and work together so the setting doesn't impede those desires.

If your character is human, consider things like skin color, eye color, and hair texture too, and how your ethnicity relates to your culture and other cultures. Don't hesitate to create a character who looks very different from you—or is of a different gender. Roleplaying games are a great place to explore the point of view of someone different from yourself. (They're a terrible place to play up stereotypes for a laugh, though—don't do that.)

CHARACTER BACKSTORY

“Backstory” is simply what happened in your character's life before the game starts. If the game creates a story, the backstory is your personal tale up until that point. It's not nearly as important as the story you'll tell with the group, but it might contribute to it, as well as help define and distinguish your character.

Backstory shapes personality, so you will want to ensure that the two work together in a meaningful way (or come up with a good reason why they don't). If your character is gruff with no patience for foolishness, perhaps it's because they had to work hard starting at an early age so they and their family could survive, and they never had any experience in play or relaxation. If they hate a particular alien race, perhaps it's because their homeworld was attacked by those aliens when they were young.

The greatest value of developing your character's backstory is so that aspects of it can affect the story told in the game. If it's just backstory and never has an impact, it's not very important. With that in mind, you should specifically put things in your backstory that the GM can use. If your brother disappeared mysteriously years ago, finding him might become a plot point in the game. If you describe a mentor who was important to you, they might make an appearance in the story, asking for your assistance. If you talk about the secluded, remote location where you were born, the story might involve traveling there. It's all fodder for the larger story, and that's great, for two reasons. First, your creation is now a big part of the main story, and second, your character will be even more invested in the main story, because now it's more personal for them.

For this reason, interesting backstories aren't necessarily about your character's childhood or family, although they can be. Perhaps, instead, focus on an interesting accomplishment that your character achieved as an adult. Maybe even consider what they were doing *right before* the first adventure begins rather than what happened in the distant past.

The start of the group's story doesn't need to be the start of your character's story. In other words, you can put interesting and significant

events in your backstory. You can assume that your character's been doing whatever it is that they do for a while now, if you wish. Not every character needs to be an eighteen-year-old just starting out. Perhaps your character is older and has already lived through a lot of interesting and exciting things.

DEVELOPING BACKSTORY LATER

You don't have to come up with an elaborate backstory at character creation. In fact, for some people, it's a bad idea. They find it difficult to create the background of a character they haven't yet played, or they run out of time and skimp on the whole exercise with a one-sentence cliché that doesn't contribute much.

Better, then, for people who wish it, to create the backstory later, after they've played through a couple of sessions. Once you have a feel for your character and the setting, it might be easier to develop a backstory that ties into the world and fits the character as you have established them. Talk to the GM and find out if this works with the campaign.

You might even see if your GM is willing to let you add to your backstory as the story goes on. If your con artist character runs into an NPC con artist, it's interesting to bring up to the GM that perhaps you and this person have met before—maybe as friends, maybe as enemies. If your mechanic character visits a major city, perhaps you already know a good place to get spare parts and have a relationship with the proprietor. This allows you to continue to contribute to the story in meaningful ways and further tie your character to the setting.

PLAYER COLLABORATION

Backstory can help explain how your character knows the other PCs. You can work with the other players to decide where and how you met. Perhaps your character and another player's character have known each other for a long time. Perhaps you're even related. For more on player bonds, see page 86.

GM COLLABORATION

If you're not sure how to create a good backstory for your character, talk to the GM. They might have some ideas or campaign setting information they're willing to share to give you something to tie your character to. For example, perhaps the GM intends to have a group of evil sorcerers as an important aspect of the campaign, and suggests that it would be interesting if you had some connection to them. Perhaps you've run afoul of these sorcerers in the past. Perhaps they attempted to recruit you. Perhaps your mother was one of them.

Most GMs will be more than happy to contribute ideas to your character's backstory if you ask them to.



SAMPLE BACKSTORIES

Below are a handful of sample backstory frameworks that you can elaborate on. You can grab one of these and use it as you wish, or simply read through them and become inspired to create your own.



You are looking for someone you've lost. They were important to you—you loved or admired them. You've looked for them for a very long time, though, and the trail has gone cold. You've joined up with the other characters literally because you didn't know what else to do. Perhaps they can help you find the person you've lost, or perhaps you will come upon a clue or sign as you undertake adventures with them.



You are a veteran of a horrific war. Its experiences taught you many skills, some of which you're not necessarily thrilled to know. It also tainted your view of authority, hierarchy, and your culture in general. You're cynical and hard-edged, and perhaps suffer from post-traumatic stress. But you're loyal to your friends, and you'll always have their back.



You are an innovator and inventor. You're always tinkering with things—machines, tools, processes, people—and trying to make them better. You're fascinated with figuring out how things work, but mostly so that you can give them a nudge or two in a new, better direction. You've invented all sorts of things, and you're happy to explain them to anyone who will listen.



You've left a family behind, hoping to earn enough money to return to them and support them. Everything you do is for them, and you'll gladly sacrifice your own needs for theirs. Even as you undertake missions with the other characters, some part of your mind's eye is still gazing homeward, your thoughts and affections always there.



Your family and community never accepted you. Your skills and abilities were looked upon not with admiration, but with horror or disgust due to religious or cultural mores. Eventually, you couldn't take it anymore and left. Still, even today it's hard for you to showcase what you can do, for fear of what people will think.



You were always the golden child. You excelled at every course of study you undertook, every competition, and every test put before you. Everyone expected that you would go on to great things. But you haven't. The pressure of these past successes drives you forward. There's still time to live up to the expectations of those who have such high hopes for you, but you'd better get cracking.



You are lost. Not physically—you know where you are—but spiritually. You don't know what to do with your life. You don't know where you belong. You feel like there's got to be some meaning out there, if you can only find it. You're hoping that joining up with the other characters will put you on a path.



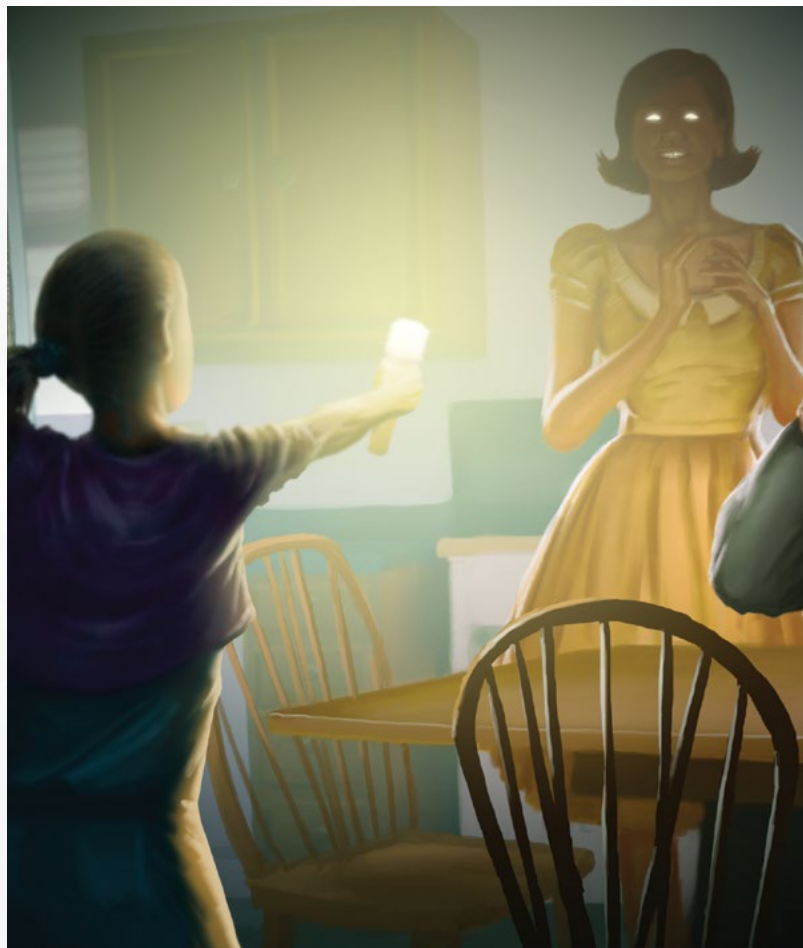
A child of wealthy parents, you have lived a pampered life. You've been trained in all sorts of areas, but you've never had to prove yourself. This has damaged your feeling of self-worth, so you fled your luxurious life and have come to a place where no one knows you. Here, among strangers, you can put yourself to the test and show that you're not a spoiled child, but a capable adult.



You did something horrible. The guilt of your past actions weighs on you, but you don't want to talk about it. You don't want people to know the terrible things you've done—you're not that person anymore, and you don't want anyone to think otherwise. You hope that undertaking the mission before you will give you a chance to atone.



You had a rough childhood. You spent time on the streets, without family or home. You got involved in petty crimes to survive, but you hated doing it. Somewhere deep inside you beat the heart of an ethical person with a strong sense of right and wrong. Sure, you learned a lot during that time, and you're wise in the way of the world, but now you've got the chance to leave that life behind and become the person you always wanted to be.



CHARACTER NAME

Naming your character seems trivial but is quite important. It's a choice you'll have to live with for the length of the campaign. Obviously, you can choose whatever name you want, but consider the following thoughts:

- ☹ Silly or funny names, names that are a pun, or names that are an inside joke will be funny for one session. By session two, the joke will be stale. Thus, they're okay for a one-shot, but probably a bad idea for a campaign.
- ☹ Check with the GM to find out if there are any naming conventions in the culture your character hails from. If there are, try to conform to them as best you can without hindering your creativity. You want to be a part of the setting, not apart from the setting. And if there are no conventions, maybe your character's name will be the start of something that influences the setting going forward.
- ☹ Lifting a name you like from fiction you enjoy is fine, but be sure it's not too well known. If you're a Tolkien fan, naming your character Amon Sul might be cool, but naming them Bilbo almost certainly isn't.
- ☹ Say the name out loud a few times. Make sure it doesn't sound like something that will be embarrassing, or a name that's easily rhymed or associated with something you don't want.
- ☹ If you give your character a long name, come up with the shortened version you *want* people to use. If your character's name is Taliensa, tell the other players that you like Tal for short (if you do). If you don't suggest a shortened name, other people will invent one on their own, and you won't be in control of it.
- ☹ When in doubt, go simple rather than elaborate. Simple names are easier to remember, easier to say in the middle of an action scene, and less likely to get mangled by your friends trying to pronounce it.

ADVANCED CHARACTER CREATION

You've got the rules down. You've made many characters before. You've chosen all the options. Now you want to up your game, so to speak. Here are some ideas to get you thinking.

CHARACTER SEED AS ELEVATOR PITCH

When writers want to summarize a story, sometimes they'll use a process called an elevator pitch. This name came from the belief that you had to be able to pitch your idea in the time it takes to ride in an elevator with someone. For some, the term has evolved somewhat into an idea shorthand—a single sentence that uses prior ideas to put the listener in the right frame of mind. “*Star Wars* meets *Die Hard*,” or “*Love Actually* meets *The Terminator*.” In other words, you take two familiar concepts and mash them together to suggest a third, presumably new concept.

This is not a terrible way to come up with really original character ideas. Combine two well-known characters from fiction to give you the seed for your game character. Consider:

- ☞ Frodo/Ripley
- ☞ Miles Morales/Charles Dexter Ward
- ☞ C-3PO/Buffy the Vampire Slayer
- ☞ Black Panther/Doctor Strange
- ☞ Gilgamesh/Imperator Furiosa
- ☞ Hermione Granger/Clarice Starling
- ☞ Cersei Lannister/Sherlock Holmes

A Frodo/Ripley mashup, for example, might suggest an extremely capable female halfling who's willing to go to any length to protect those she loves. C-3PO/Buffy might be a prim and proper undead-slaying robot. You can create these elevator pitches from any two (or more) characters you wish. It's just something to get you started and move away from well-trodden territory.

QUIRKS AND FLAWS

Even if you make the most conventional of RPG characters, give them a quirk or a flaw that will make them memorable. The other players might not remember a dwarf fighter, but they'll remember the dwarf fighter who braided trophies into their beard as they progressed from adventure to adventure.

Flaws are interesting because not only do they add a spark to your character, they're also something you can work to overcome.

Quirks

- ☞ You dress all in a single color.
- ☞ You insist on calling yourself by a strange (possibly self-aggrandizing) nickname.
- ☞ You give everyone you meet a nickname.
- ☞ You refuse to use any weapon other than your favorite.
- ☞ You have a small pet animal, like a hedgehog or a toad, that you carry at all times.
- ☞ You talk loudly in your sleep.
- ☞ You sing little songs while doing other things.
- ☞ You never drink alcohol.
- ☞ You're always trying to relate things to your past sports career.

Flaws

- ☞ You hate and/or fear a particular type of creature.
- ☞ You're always calling people by the wrong name.
- ☞ You react very poorly to authority figures.
- ☞ You laugh at the most inappropriate times.
- ☞ It's hard for you to resist a wager or dare.
- ☞ You are plagued by horrific nightmares and often awaken screaming.
- ☞ You have serious allergies.
- ☞ You are clumsy.

QUOTES AND MOTTOS

When making up your character, write down two or three phrases that they will use regularly. Maybe one is for when they are surprised, like “By Odin’s beard!” or “Flaming moons!” Another might be when they engage in an important activity, such as “This is where the rubber meets the road,” or “Now it’s business time.”

The exact phrases matter less than how often you use them. If they’re all you ever say, that will get old fast. If you almost never use them, no one will even notice. You want a quote or motto to be something the other players soon (say, by the third session) come to expect you to say in a particular situation, and it’s fun, not annoying. This means that you should tie them to situations consistently, but not to something that you do more than once or twice in a session.

ARTWORK

Many of us are visual people, and as the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. There’s so much wonderful art out there in books and comics or online, it’s not hard to search through it and find something you can show the group and say, “My character looks like this.” Even if the art isn’t a perfect match, so you have to say, “My character looks like this, but the jumpsuit is green and I have a cybernetic right hand,” it’s still a powerful visual statement. The group will carry that picture in their minds going forward when they think of your character.

There are also talented artists out there who will draw your character to your specifications for a reasonable fee. If a character becomes a favorite, it might be something to try!

CUSTOMIZE YOUR TOOLS

Get dice, a notebook, or a pen that somehow suggests your character’s nature. Make a personalized character sheet that somehow reflects their personality. Draw a symbol on it that has meaning for them.

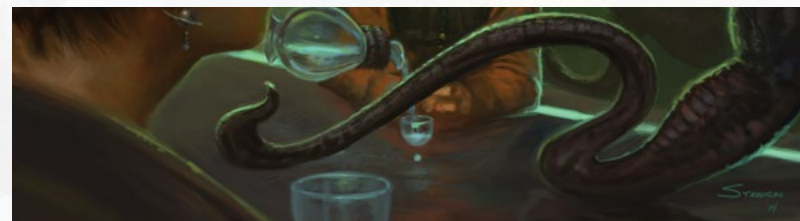
Making a Character Quickly

You’ve got a new game starting up, but the week was really busy and time got away from you. Now the session starts in twenty minutes and you still haven’t created a character. What do you do?

1. Grab a favorite character from fiction. Book, movie, television—doesn’t matter. Think about what they’re good at, and start there.
2. Hash out the basic stats and abilities you’ll need. Use the choice you made in step 1 as a guide. Don’t worry about the minutiae, and don’t linger over all the choices in front of you. Just write down what you’ll need to know in the first session.
3. Develop a quick backstory based on the character you chose in step 1, or grab one of the samples given in this chapter.
4. Name the character and give their appearance enough thought that you could describe them in a sentence.
5. Show up at the session and don’t tell anyone you threw the character together while you waited for the barista to serve your latte in the coffee shop. If you play them confidently, no one will know.

THEMED SNACKS

Come up with a recipe for food or beverages that somehow suggests your character—maybe it’s their favorite, or a snack from their homeland. Bring some of it to share with the rest of the group and explain why it’s significant to your character.



How Does [Your Character] Feel About That?

by Matt Colville

New players and even many experienced players aren't used to expressing themselves through their characters (or even, depending on your players, at all). In other words, when dope stuff happens in your game, it's not unusual for players to just sit there, expressionless, waiting for the opportunity to use some ability on their character sheets. The GM then feels frustrated because it seems like the players aren't "playing." What we really mean is they're not *reacting*.

This is natural! It doesn't mean they're bad players—they just need a prompt. So give them one! It's perfectly reasonable for the GM to literally ask a player, "How does your character feel about that?" or "How does your character react to that?" In my experience, players respond very positively to these questions. They are waiting for an opportunity, they want an opportunity, but they just don't know it.

Once you get the ball rolling, you'll discover these questions actually remove a huge burden from you as a GM. Before, you were doing all the work. But, with some well-placed questions, you can spark a conversation that gets the players talking for twenty minutes! Making it much less likely they'll grind through all the content you had prepared for the next month in only a few hours.

It's pretty common when starting a new adventure or campaign for the GM to ask the players, "What does your character look like?"

Each player then gets a chance to describe their PC visually. Try also asking them, "What kind of *attitude* do you give off?" We want to know not only how they look, but how they *seem*. You can do this any time. If a PC approaches an NPC, you can ask, "Does your character seem threatening?" Or curious? Or friendly? Before you asked, the player might not have thought about this. Once you ask, they *have* to think about it, and this is the beginning of roleplaying.

There are larger questions you can put to the entire group. "Do you folks intend to let this creature go?" You can take anything, any issue, and frame it as a question. Once you've done this a few times, you can take some incredibly leading questions and phrase them in such a way that they sound like perfectly reasonable things for a neutral game master to ask, and the players won't realize they're being nudged into focusing on the things your adventure needs in order to keep pacing and drama engaging.

Asking players direct questions about their characters can drive an entire campaign. And eventually, some of your players will get used to describing, unprompted, their reactions, their intent, how they *seem*. Which not only makes a much better game, it also makes your job a lot easier.

THE WELL-EQUIPPED PLAYER

You've got your character all made, and you're ready to head off to the first game session. What do you bring?

Well, your gamer bag, of course. What's in a gamer bag?

The Essentials

You need the following:

- ☞ Dice, obviously. Whatever dice you'll need for the game, plus maybe—if it suits you—a few extra in case your main dice don't seem to have the mojo you need and they roll poorly. If dice are difficult to use, there are Braille dice or apps that generate a number and verbally announce it.
- ☞ Just as obvious, your character sheet. Sometimes a player will keep their character sheet in digital form on a tablet, a laptop, or perhaps their phone. That's okay, too.
- ☞ Pencils or pens. Even if you have a digital character sheet, you might still have to write some things down.
- ☞ A notebook. Again, you can type notes on a device, but you might find that a notebook is good not only for notes but also for drawing maps, making a quick sketch, or something else that might come up.
- ☞ A drink for you—water, soda, or whatever you prefer.
- ☞ A snack to share. If you're not hosting the game, it's always good to bring something for the group.
- ☞ A rulebook. Your GM might have the rulebook, but if you've got your own copy, bring it. If you're constantly referencing the rules and you don't have your own book, strongly consider getting your own copy. It's more efficient to have multiple copies of the rules at the table, and it's nice to be able to refer to them when you're at home.

The Extras

The following aren't necessary, but they can be fun to have:

- ☞ A dice bag or other container. Sure, you can let your dice float amid all the other stuff in the bag, but most gamers eventually get a small bag or a little box just for their dice. (If you're a new player, you should know that RPG players have a thing about dice. They often feel they have to keep their dice in a nice container. It's like a baseball or softball player with their own glove. Treat your dice well and maybe they'll treat you well. Plus, the cool dice bag or case that you pull out at the beginning of the session might say something about you. Maybe it has Cthulhu on it, showing that you're a Cthulhu fan. Maybe it features your favorite anime character, or maybe it's made to look like it's covered in dragon scales. Some crafty gamers design and make their own bags and cases, but of course you can buy one too. Or maybe you're more no-nonsense and a plastic Ziploc bag is good enough for you—it's your choice.)
- ☞ An extra copy of your character sheet for the GM.
- ☞ Funky dice with swirls, colors, or whatever you like.
- ☞ Dice tray. Anyone who plays frequently knows that a surprising amount of die rolls clatter off the table and onto the floor. There are even things called dice towers or dice rollers—typically, tall devices where you drop a die in the top and it rolls out the bottom. Any of these can be useful in particular for people who have mobility issues and find dice difficult to manage.
- ☞ A miniature that represents your character.



CHAPTER 5: PLAYING YOUR CHARACTER

As already explained, playing your character is your way to contribute to the story the group is creating. It's what you do in the game. But what does that really mean?

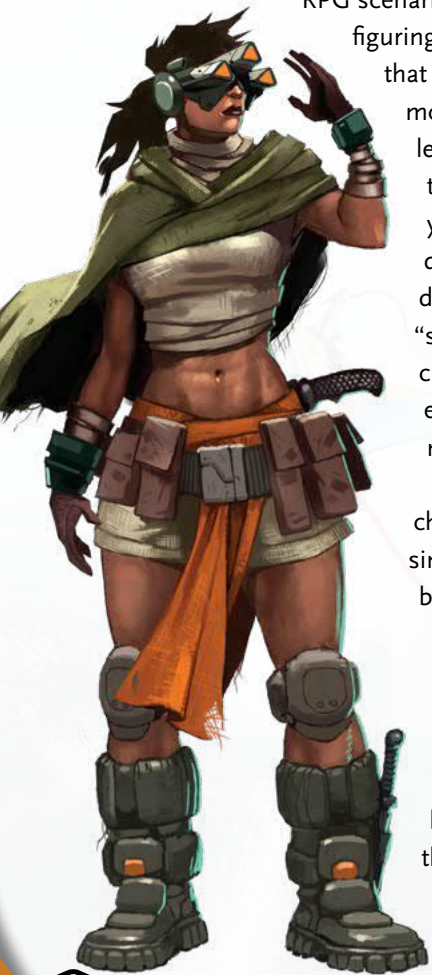
Basically, you make choices on behalf of your character. A good RPG scenario is all about choices, whether that involves figuring out how to get the police officer to understand that your character wasn't even at home when the monster tore off the roof, or deciding to take the left passage instead of the right while exploring the dungeon. This can be a deep examination on your part to figure out what your character would do—perhaps even in contrast to what you would do. Alternatively, you can do whatever you think is “smart.” How you approach the challenge of making choices for your character is up to you. But let's examine some of the methods you can use a bit more closely.

Doing What's Smart: Some people see the choices and challenges a character faces in an RPG simply as problems to solve. They make their choices based on the best solutions to the problems that they can come up with, and judge the success or failure of their participation in the game by the success or failure of the solutions. This is a perfectly valid play style. Just be aware that someone else might intentionally *not* make the best choice because they want to do what's true to their character, and that's also perfectly valid. If your character isn't very bright, you can intentionally make a poor choice.

Doing What's Right: You might not be motivated by success but instead by what's right. You're interested in doing the ethical, kind, or heroic thing. The noble thing. This is a fine method, but sometimes it can lead to small confrontations with other characters, because not everyone agrees on what's “right,” and of course sometimes what's right in the larger sense is not what's right for an individual (like your character or another PC).

Doing What Your Character Would Do: This is the very heart of roleplaying. You've determined your character's personality and the kinds of things they will and won't do, and you use that going forward to make choices as they arise. A well-played character in this way is great not only for you and the story, but also for the other players. They will quickly figure out what kind of person your character is and will learn to expect and even anticipate your actions. This isn't a bad thing—on the contrary, it means you've created a consistent and relatable character. “Well, we know that Tammie's paladin won't help us break into the mayor's house,” another player might say. Tammie's done a good job of establishing her character as an upstanding and law-abiding hero.

This method also involves playing up your character's traits over your own. If your character is smart, sneaky, brave, or hotheaded, you will choose to do the smart, sneaky, brave, or hotheaded thing in a given situation, even if you (the player) are not like that at all. It can be challenging to play a character who is super intelligent if you don't see yourself as being such. Or more gregarious or charming if you're personally shy. Sometimes the GM can be of help here, if you use them as a resource. Just say to the GM, “My character is really knowledgeable about military tactics. Is there something that would occur to her that wouldn't occur to me?” Or, “My character is a great talker. I—the player—don't know the right thing to say in this situation, but my character might, don't you think?” There might be a die roll or mechanic



you can use to get this kind of insight, and if not, maybe the GM can at least give you a suggestion or an ad hoc game bonus suitable for the situation.

However, you don't want "doing what my character would do" to become an excuse for plain old bad behavior. If your character is a jerk, and you do something mean or counterproductive with the excuse of "it's what my character would do," that can disrupt the game. You're using roleplaying as a justification to make other players have less fun, and that's never valid.

Doing What's Expected of You: RPGs are a group activity, and they're set up so that your character is one member of a group that works together toward a common goal. In this light, you probably have a role to play built into your character. If you're playing a tough, tank-like warrior, your role might be to stand in front and take (and deal) damage so the weaker characters stay safe. If you're playing a sneaky rogue, your role might be to creep ahead quietly, scope out the situation, and return. In this way, the kind of character you play might define the kind of choices you make. But you're not *obligated* to make choices based on this. Your big tough warrior might want to hang in the back because they've got a great ranged weapon, or because they're scared. The only time this becomes a problem is when the other characters are counting on you to fulfill your role and you don't communicate clearly your intentions to do something different.

PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

Although we probably tend to think of it as something that affects brand-new players, any player can have performance anxiety. It's when you're nervous to come to the table because you might not do what you're "supposed" to do. This relates back to "doing what's smart" or "doing what's expected of you." Players worry that in a game that is all about choices, they might make the wrong one. And—to stay on this train of thought—because the players all work as a group, a mistake on

one player's part can spell trouble for everyone else. No one wants to be the character who makes a mistake and gets someone else (or *everyone* else) killed, for example.

Almost any activity you do with other people can cause this reaction. Sometimes we all feel like everyone's watching us, and we obviously want them to see us as clever and skilled. The best way to deal with this is to remember that everyone feels this way from time to time. No one at the table is expecting a lot from you—not because they don't think you're capable, but because they're too busy focusing on their own character and their own choices.

The other thing to remember is it's just a game. No one's real life is riding on what you might do. You're not playing for money. And to top it all off, you're among friends. Even if you're a new player, or new to the group you're about to play with, no one is expecting you to swoop in and blow their minds with your roleplaying talents and brilliantly creative ideas. They probably don't have any expectations at all. Or, if they do, they're much more related to how fun you are to play with, not how fantastically you play. So just relax. Focus on being fun to have at the table, and on having fun yourself.

YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GM

At some point, someone is going to tell you that the GM is in charge. That they are like the "god" of the game. I think I may have said that on occasion as well. But I was probably fourteen or so at the time.

It's not a very apt thing to say. In most people's experience, it's exactly this kind of thinking that leads to an adversarial relationship between the GM and the players. I know, that doesn't make any sense. If they're really "god," then they're probably more like an impartial judge whose rulings can't be questioned. And that's not a terrible approach. (But see below.) Yet I can tell you from experience that if you've got a GM who says they're the god of the game, you've probably got a budding adversarial relationship, and that's not healthy.

It's probably because if someone has to proclaim themselves to be "god," most likely they are (rightly or wrongly) expecting people to challenge their role. It's tempting to paint a GM who says that as someone who's had power go to their head, but maybe it's just as much the other players who have caused the problem by backing the GM into a corner. A GM who takes their role as arbiter and storyteller seriously will feel that role challenged—and therefore the entire game challenged—if the players constantly argue with them.

It's so much better to think of the GM as one of the joint storytellers at the table, different from but similar to the other players. Being a GM requires its own skillsets and understanding (all of which is discussed at length in Chapter 8: Game Master Basics), and it does involve adjudication and making rulings, and players should more or less look at a GM's rulings as if they were written in the rulebook.

But the GM wants what the players want: a great story told together. GMs may joke about killing off all the characters, but that's not their real goal, because if they do that, the game is over, and no one—including the GM—can play anymore. If you think about it, it's almost certainly the GM who has the *most* invested in the campaign. They've very likely spent a lot more time preparing a setting, an adventure, a bunch of NPCs, and so forth than any of the players have spent working on their characters. Because of this, you'll find that many GMs refer to "my game" or "my campaign." If the game has to stop, it's the GM who loses the most. All this adds up to mean that the GM doesn't want the PCs to fail, but to succeed so the game can continue. Thus, the GM isn't an adversary—they're an ally. They might provide challenges, opponents, traps, threats, or outright disasters, but it's in pursuit of creating a great story.

In the end, I don't think you should treat the GM as someone who can't be questioned. However, how you go about questioning them is a delicate but important matter. Running a game is challenging, and often the GM will be called upon in the middle of a session to make a ruling on the fly. If you question that ruling, you're going to undermine the GM's role on the spot and discourage them from making future rulings

on the fly, which is counterproductive to a good, fast-paced session. In addition, you will suddenly turn a game that's primarily about story into a game that's primarily about rules. In my own games, I frequently have a rule that says, "No rules discussions at the table."

Let's break that down a bit. The key words there are "discussions" and "at the table." The GM can make a ruling, but that's not an invitation for the other players to weigh in and *discuss* whether that's how a rule should work. After the game (not at the table), players are more than welcome to start a discussion about a rule or ruling to understand it better, address its fairness or appropriateness, or provide an alternative if they'd prefer. Outside the context of the game session, you can talk about rules as much as you want. However, someone *still* needs to be the one who makes the final decision, and the person who has that role in the group is the GM.

YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE OTHER PLAYERS

Roleplaying is a co-op game. If you're looking around the table and seeing the other players as anything other than allies, friends, or partners, something's probably gone quite wrong.

WORKING WITH OTHERS

As in real life, sometimes playing an RPG involves having to solve problems or make decisions as a group. In fact, in most RPG sessions, this will be a large part of play.

But it's often more difficult than it sounds. Half the group wants to go down the left passage in the dungeon, and the others want to go right. The group's been talking about it for ten minutes and the GM wants a decision. What do you do?

Well, the real answer is: try not to let it come to that in the first place. Instead, determine how you want to handle such a situation before it occurs. You can do that in a few different ways:

DECISION PARAMETERS

Before you get into the thick of things, establish some basic guidelines that everyone can agree on for situations that might occur. This very likely will shift from scenario to scenario. For example, you might say, “As we sneak into the building, we’re going to avoid combat or anything else that will make a lot of noise. We’ll head directly to the reactor core, and try to get there as quickly as possible.” Now everyone in the group is on the same page for a lot of important decisions as you infiltrate the structure. If you see a guard on patrol, everyone will already know not to attack them, but instead try to hide. If there’s a choice of directions to go, everyone’s already agreed to head toward the reactor core.

As stated, though, you’ll want to establish new parameters in each new situation. If the same group is hoping to wipe out an evil cult, it might not be about stealth and speed but, rather, to defeat every cultist and destroy every shrine, no matter how long it takes.

GROUP EXPERTS

Give everyone in the group an area of expertise. In a fantasy game, for example, you might establish that the fighter is the combat expert, the wizard is the magic expert, and so on. That means each character is the final arbiter of decisions having to do with that area. So the fighter decides if the group engages with the enemy, weighing their chances of success. But the wizard decides if the magical orb floating in the air should be preserved or smashed. The rogue, after scouting ahead, has the final say over which direction to go based on what they saw. And so on.

Every person in the group can still weigh in with their opinions whenever they want, but each expert makes the final decision for their area. As with setting decision parameters, the group may need to alter the guidelines in a new situation. If the entire castle you’re exploring is highly magical, it might be the wizard who should ultimately determine which path to take. If the fighter has a magic item that allows them to see through walls, maybe they should decide which way to go. And so on.



The Allure of Mimic-Munched Ears (or, Make Interesting Choices, Not Good Ones)

by Susan J. Morris

All right, who's more interesting: the character whose ears were masticated by a mimic, or the character with perfect ears? Yes, *thank you*, the character with mimic-munched ears, obviously, unless you've got a thing for perfect ears, at which point, you do you. But why are mimic-munched ears so deeply alluring, you ask? Because there's a *story* there. The GM gave the player a choice, and it resulted in her head in a mimic's mouth. Probably the barbarian had to pull her out. Probably the wizard still gives her shit for it. Probably the cleric almost died laughing.

And it probably wasn't a "good" choice that got her there—it was an *interesting* one.

As players, we walk the line between our characters and ourselves. If the GM gives you a choice, it can sometimes feel like a challenge—like a puzzle to be solved. Or sometimes like the GM is trying to trick you. And it can be tempting—and enjoyable!—to analyze it, to find that optimal solution, even if it takes all game. Which can be great if that's what you want to do. Whatever scratches your itches, if you know what I mean.

But the point where I started having more fun as a player was when I realized that the most interesting choice is not always the most optimal one—that sometimes *terrible choices* are the interesting ones. After all, we aren't so much our characters as we are their authors, here to make our characters' lives captivating hell. Which means there aren't so much right and wrong choices as there are interesting and boring choices—the definitions of which are entirely up to you.

Think of it this way: "bad" choices are like invitations to side quests, and "good" choices are like ignoring the side quests in favor of the main storyline. Sometimes you want new complications, new plotlines, new delightfully terrible situations to light a fire under your character. Other times, you're not interested, or you just need a win, or you're super engaged in the main story and want to push forward with that. There is no wrong answer—there's just how you want to play the game.

So the next time you're faced with a mysterious person offering an equally mysterious treasure that is definitely not an ear-munching mimic, try it out. Ask yourself: what's the worst that could happen? And more important, would it be *fun*?

A LEADER

Establishing a group leader sounds like an obvious solution, particularly to newer players, but it's probably my least favorite of the options. The problem is that if one person is the final arbiter of all decisions—in effect, the "expert" on everything (using the terminology of the Group Experts option above), it's easy for the other players to get relegated to second-class status.

In the early days of roleplaying games, the group sizes would sometimes be very large, so a group "caller" would be chosen to relay group information to the GM and assign duties to each player. "Bill's and Tanya's characters will check out the sarcophagus, Ed's wizard will try to identify the runes on the wall, Martin's thief will keep lookout, and the rest of us will search the walls for secret doors or compartments," the caller might say to the GM. This tradition didn't last long, and you

can probably see why. It takes away the agency of most of the players, who generally just do what they're told and roll dice when needed. Only when extra detail is needed, such as *how* Bill's and Tanya's characters go about investigating the sarcophagus, do the other players get to interact with the GM and voice an opinion. It's less like storytelling and more procedural.

But there is a way around this so you can have a leader without having a caller. That is to vary the leader based either on taking turns or on letting the situation guide the group. For example, you might change who the final arbiter is with each session. Or you might vary it by who has the most incentive. If the scenario at hand is about retrieving something stolen from one character, let that character take the lead.

JUST WING IT

If you understand the players and their characters in the group, and it seems like for the most part, most of the time, the players (and the characters) are not going to run afoul of problems while making decisions, just proceed without worrying about it. Let the choices come, and with each one, let the players talk it through if need be. As long as no one tries to take advantage of someone else's good nature, and as long as no serious arguments arise, you'll be fine. In fact, you'll very likely intuit the way to let all this happen. You'll see that some players don't want to have a say in which direction to go, but they might want to take part in a negotiation with an NPC. Meanwhile, the person who has a plan for making the group's way through the wilderness doesn't care about talking to an NPC. And you might have a player or two who don't get involved on that level and simply enjoy the ride. In other words, your group might establish its own unique dynamic without even thinking about it. And that's just fine.



STRIFE AMONG THE PLAYERS

Sometimes there's going to be drama. Conflict. Disagreements. It happens every time you get a group of people together. Someone will do or say something that someone else doesn't care for. It could be something in the story of the game (a situation involving the characters) or something at the table (a situation involving the players). The latter is likely more serious than the former, but either way, the game will probably come to a temporary halt and if the situation isn't defused, it could damage the game group.

Don't panic. But do try to do something that might help.

Be a peacemaker.

Let's first consider the problem that arises among the characters. Keep in mind that character conflict can quickly escalate to player conflict. Good players keep character conflict only at the table—your character might be mad at another character, but as players and people in the real world, you're still perfectly happy. You recognize that getting mad at someone for something their character does in a game is as silly as getting angry at a fictional character in a movie for something they do on screen. At most, it's a momentary feeling that passes as soon as you recognize that it's not a real person doing a real thing. There are no real ramifications.

In fact, consider this: when character actions provoke player emotions, that's a good thing. It shows that the game is meaningful and compelling. If you're angry because the dwarf knocked all the potions on the floor, shattering them, you're invested in the story, and you're angry that it didn't go the way you wanted. But take a breath and remember—it really is just a game. It's a story, and sometimes things happen in stories that you don't like.

But let's say there's a serious disagreement between two players about what to do next in the game. Remember, we've already established that playing an RPG is all about choices. Sometimes these are group choices, not individual choices. The group needs to come to a consensus, but it's having a tough time doing so.

Try to look at the issue from both sides. Insert yourself into the conversation and (re)state each person's position, agreeing that both are valid points of view. "Shari, you want us to leave the space station and go back to the planet, which might be the prudent thing to do. Bob, you want to stay here and negotiate with the aliens. That could be helpful in this situation."

And then, do one of two things:

1. Propose a solution. If you can combine the two points into one somehow, that's best. But if you must, pick a side, while making it clear that everyone has a good point. Find a way for the group to decide how to proceed.
2. Propose that the group chooses one point of view (perhaps by a vote or by rolling dice), but that the person on the other side of the disagreement gets to make a decision next time there is an important issue at hand.

In this case, of course, the GM can be counted among the players. This means that one of the people involved in the disagreement could be the GM. In most cases, this happens when a player is upset because of how the GM made a ruling or handled a situation (obviously it's not a case where the GM says the group should go left and a player says to go right—the GM has no voice in that kind of decision). This is both an easier and a harder situation. Easier because if the GM is trying to arbitrate fairly, you should probably go with what they say (and if there's a discussion needed, have it after the session). Harder because some players will think it unfair. Plus, what if the GM doesn't seem to be trying to arbitrate fairly? If you must, treat the GM like any other player and try to be a peacemaker.

What if you're directly involved in the strife? Well, if you can remove yourself from the issue, you can use the same peacemaking tactics. Otherwise, ask for another player to arbitrate and play peacemaker. Just try to keep a level head, and remember that it's a game and you're playing to have fun.

PLAYER AS STORYTELLER

Since it's the group that tells the story, not just the GM, then all the players are storytellers too. But what does that really mean? It means that while you want what's best for your character, and you want what's best for the group, you also want what's best for the story. You're a participant in the story and your role is to play your character as well as you can, but there's more to it than that, if you're willing to go that extra step.

CREATE!

Name your horse.

Describe your hat.

Think about how you take care of your equipment, and where you got that weird bit of alien tech.

Come up with the name of your high school math teacher and the reason why he was such a jerk.

You're in charge of all aspects of your character. They are your hand reaching into the fictional world. That means your character is in your purview, not the GM's, and not some other player's. You create the details. And the more detail you put into your character's personality, appearance, background, mannerisms, and so forth, the more you contribute to the overall story. Everything your character does, says, wears, or thinks is part of the story the group is telling. Might as well make it interesting! Give it some attention. You don't have to have created it all by the time you start. You don't have to show up at the first session with your character's entire life story, wardrobe, and every personality quirk all detailed. Lots of this stuff will occur to you as you go along. Flesh these things out bit by bit at each new session. Soon you'll have a very interesting and detailed character that's likely even more fun to play because of this extra work.

Talk with your GM about the town or city or farm that your character comes from. Place it on the map and provide details. More than likely, your GM will not only appreciate your efforts, but also reward you by

having your creations come onto the "stage" when the details you create are incorporated into the plot. The sister you haven't seen for a decade shows up at your door, asking for help. The mayor of the town you're from goes missing. The woman who sold you that blaster rifle was actually a shapeshifting spy. In all these cases, you provided the fodder for what became part of the group's story with your creation of the sister, the mayor, or the arms dealer.

If your group is comfortable with players having some narrative control, you can insert your own creations into the story even more overtly. You need some papers forged to succeed in your current adventure? Say to the GM, "Hey, I think my childhood friend did some time in prison for forgery. Can we go talk to him?" Maybe you already had that detail in your backstory, or maybe you just made it up on the fly, but either way it makes for an interesting turn in the story and provides a next step for the group, and for both of those reasons, the whole group should be happy to include the idea. Of course, once you've inserted your ne'er-do-well friend into the narrative, remember that it's the GM's purview to take that idea and run with it. Your old friend might be beholden to your worst enemy and set you up. (But that's a great story!)

HELP THE GM MANAGE

The GM sets the tone, but the players match the tone. You can't establish the right mood unless everyone cooperates. If you're playing a horror scenario and you make a few too many silly jokes, you might be detracting from, rather than adding to, the story and everyone's enjoyment of the game. Sometimes, it's helpful when you're a player to think about what you would do if you were the GM. If you're having an encounter that is a solemn interaction with an emissary of Odin, you as the GM would try to set the stage and the mood for that event. But you as a player can help do those same things. Take on a serious tone, describe the formal garments you don, maybe even stand up from the table and make a real bow to show your respect to the divine representative. Not only will you be helping the GM, you'll encourage

the other players to do likewise. Most players are happy to follow cues like that, but someone's got to give the cues, and often it's as effective or more effective if they come from another player rather than the GM (or, at least, *just* the GM).

There are other ways to help the GM manage. Rules can get in the way of the story, so help the GM use and dispense with them as quickly and efficiently as possible. Look up a rule you need while another player takes their turn so that when it's your turn, you're ready to go. Help



other players with the rules when they need it. Don't argue with the GM's interpretation of a rule. Use the rules, but don't focus too much on them. These things are true even if you play a very rules-heavy, rules-focused game. Every group will interpret for themselves what focusing "too much" on the rules means. You always want to focus on them just the right amount. Take your cues from the rest of the group in this way.

Run interference for the GM. If another player needs something—what die to roll, what an NPC's name is, how much a shotgun costs—and you know the answer, help that player so the GM can continue focusing on other things. Running a game is a juggling act of details, ideas, people, and rules, and GMs appreciate any help they can get.

Help provide story details that you know. When the GM says that the vampire claims to be from the ancient city of Nairla, flip open your notebook, look to what you learned about Nairla a few sessions earlier, and—without interrupting the GM, which is just rude—provide those details for the other players. GMs like to hear the details of their creation repeated back to them. It tells them that you're paying attention and that all their hard work creating that stuff was worth it. You saying it, rather than the GM saying it, makes it seem more substantive, because multiple people talking about the fictional world as though it's a real place helps reinforce the imaginary space that the whole group shares.

LEAN INTO FAILURE (OCCASIONALLY)

I know—it seems counterintuitive. You play games to win, and you win an RPG by succeeding at your goals (defeat the villain, get the gold, get more powerful, and the like). But if you're a player focused on story, you need to look at things a little differently sometimes, because to win an RPG from this perspective is to tell a great story. And sometimes the best stories arise out of failure or defeat. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf falls while saving his companions from the Balrog, making for a great story (and, of course, he gets to come back, making for an even better story). In *Dune*, House Harkonnen defeats House Atreides,

sending Paul and Jessica fleeing into the desert, where they encounter the Fremmen, who make the rest of the story happen. Practically every great tale involves the heroes getting knocked down so they can get back up again, stronger than before.

Now, I'm not saying you should intentionally botch your saving throws or anything like that, but if the bad guy's minions surround your group of PCs and demand your surrender, consider for a moment that surrender might make a great story. Because then you get marched in to see the archvillain and you get to have that scene. Or you get to stage a prison break. Or both. In other words, if it looks like failure might be fun, every once in a while, don't fight it so hard. Don't get upset when things don't go as you expected or hoped (a game using dice is always going to have some surprises).

Another way of looking at this is to ride the ride no matter where it goes, and look for something to enjoy wherever it takes you. Make the best of whatever situation you're in and let the story keep moving forward. If your foes foil your plans, make a new plan. If the dragon sends you all fleeing, regroup and try another tactic. Or maybe another dungeon.

When you look back on the campaign after it's all over, you'll relish the failures almost as much as the successes. You'll see that a story of ups and downs is much more interesting than a tale of win after win. Reach for success, but be accepting of failure. It's all fodder for the story.

DON'T PLAN TOO FAR AHEAD

You want to create a story for your character, and planning ahead is good, but when you're at the table, focus on the story that's in front of you right now. Figure out how to have as much fun as you can with what you've got. This advice is generally applicable to all aspects of your character, from the things you want to get out of the story to using up all your special abilities or items. If you're saving an idea or a special one-use item or whatever for something that won't happen for many sessions, that might not be wise, because who knows where the story

will go by then? If you want your character to find a boyfriend, don't think of that as a "someday" thing. Go meet people right now and see if you find someone interesting. (This could, in fact, be general life advice, actually.)

When you're telling your character's story, you don't need to have everything already planned out. In fact, doing so is counter to the premise of the game. That's why it has random elements. You might *want* to clear out the goblin-infested castle, make it your home, and settle down there with your spouse and raise a family, but that doesn't mean you'll pull it off, no matter how much thought you put into it. In the ensuing confrontation, the goblin sorcerer might accidentally blow the whole place up.





This means that part of the storytelling you're doing in an RPG is storytelling by discovery, not by planning. The castle is a pile of rubble, and you have to figure out what to do next. No one planned to tell that story, but it happened and now you've got to keep the story moving. That's not failure—it's fun!

Thus, RPG storytelling is a bit by the seat of your pants. Rather than having your character's whole life planned out, you're better off with a general goal and then moving forward and seeing what happens. There's a lot of improvisation. Embrace that. Jump into new situations eagerly, even if you don't know where they're going. Make a plan where you know what step one is, but you don't have a clue what step two might be. Don't worry—you'll figure it out when you get there. (To be extra clear, it's okay if you do have a whole plan. That can be fun too. The point is that if you *don't* have a plan, don't let that slow you down, and don't despair if you never get to the step two you had planned because things went sideways immediately in step one.)

MAKE YOUR STORY INTENTIONS CLEAR

If you're playing a game like chess, you move your pieces one at a time. You do so with intent—if you move your bishop, you might trap your opponent's queen with your rook—but you don't announce that intention. You just move your bishop.

An RPG isn't chess. Your "moves" are your character's actions, and you tell the GM what you want your character to do. But don't hesitate to tell the GM and the other players what your intentions are. Your action might be "I toss the thermal detonator down the corridor," but your intention is, "I want to blow a hole in the bulkhead so we can get to the shuttle bay." Stating your intention can help the GM resolve the action and help the other players react appropriately.

But let's take that a step further. Your character goes up to the queen and makes a lewd suggestion. That's your action, and you do it because you're roleplaying your character and that's what they would do. Your intention, however, isn't to get slapped in the face, thrown out, thrown in

jail, or, worse, get the whole group thrown out of the throne room. You don't want to screw over your friends. So you state your intention: "I'm walking up to the queen with my best come-hither stare and wagging my eyebrows. You guys know that I flirt with everyone. Maybe someone should stop me? Or be there to quickly smooth things over?"

That's the difference between a storyteller and just someone taking actions. You recognize that there's a fun story moment here, but you don't necessarily want it to ruin everyone's day. You might want to use this approach with moderation, of course, but when in doubt, tell the table why you're doing what you're doing, and maybe even point out any bad thing you're hoping to avoid.

ENJOY, BUT DON'T USE, METAGAME KNOWLEDGE

If you're playing a game set in the early 1930s and you meet a strange man named Aleister Crowley, enjoy the sudden appearance of a real, infamous character in the campaign but don't let any knowledge you might have of him spoil the story. Don't have your character in ancient Egypt try to invent a steam engine just because you know how to build one. Don't use your knowledge of the Star Trek universe to reveal facts about the Romulans that your character couldn't know.

Why? Because your group is trying to tell a story set in the 1930s, in ancient Egypt, or in Star Trek's Federation, and if you bring in your own knowledge, that spoils the story. A novel writer working in one of those settings wouldn't inexplicably have a character do something like that because it wouldn't make sense in the story.

Instead, what a writer might do in those situations is use dramatic irony. Dramatic irony in a work of fiction is when the audience knows things that the character in the story does not. Used well, it can create an additional level to a story. When Stephen King namedrops a character from another one of his books in the novel you're reading, if you catch the reference, you suddenly have a greater understanding of the story than a reader who doesn't know the name and certainly more than the character in the novel. You see things on multiple levels and get an "aha!" moment.

And it works the same in games. In the course of an encounter with Crowley, you might try to be the one who coins the nickname "The Great Beast." In ancient Egypt, you might recognize that if your character had a steam engine, it would solve all your problems. In your Star Trek game, you might see that *your* knowledge of the Romulans proves to be correct, even as your character makes a terrible mistake because they do not have that knowledge.

The goal here is to understand the line between character knowledge and player knowledge. That can be tricky, but there's nothing wrong with talking about it aloud with the GM or the rest of the group. "Would my character know enough about chemistry to know that mixing these two things would be a really bad idea?" When in doubt, consider your character's intelligence. If you're playing someone really smart, maybe they do know more than you might think.



SHARE THE SPOTLIGHT

You're not the only main character in this story. All the PCs are. As a good storyteller, you know that the narrative can't focus on just one character all the time. You know that sometimes someone else is the central figure, and overall, the goal should be that everyone gets equal time in the spotlight.

Another way to look at it is this: your character is the star of their own story, but you're an important supporting character in the stories of every other PC in the game. That means you're very likely a supporting character more than you're the main character. So be a really good, really interesting supporting character as well as a good main character. Be interested in everyone's individual story as well as the story of the group. Do what you can to make their story better, and never try to distract from it, diminish it, or spoil it in any way.

Plus, while you're telling the story of your character, and you're working with the group to tell the group's story, don't forget to watch the stories of the characters around you unfold. Your friend who has the goal of tracking down the author of the mysterious book they're carrying is telling a really entertaining story. Join in if you can, and if you can't, sit back and appreciate it.

INTRODUCE YOURSELF

You've made your character and come up with some great background details and story hooks. Now it's time to introduce yourself to the other players. When you do this, think about what the other *characters* would know about yours, and think about what the other *players* need to know to enjoy the game.

For the characters, consider first and foremost how long they've known your character. If they've been together for some time, they probably know your character fairly well. Tell them the most relevant details that they would know from your time together. Start with your character's name and appearance, of course, but also add typical ways of going about things and moving through the world. Is your character

sneaky? Itching for a fight? Maybe they love magic or are really good at fixing things. Maybe they love exploring or hate orcs. If it's something observable or something your character talks about often, let the others know. This is all much more important than a list of your skills or your exact stats. (That kind of metagame information can come later.)

Of course, if the other characters are meeting yours for the first time, a description of their physical appearance (including clothing worn or gear carried) and maybe the sound of their voice is all you share up front. The others will have to learn the rest in the course of the first session(s).

But for the players, if you have a character with some kind of special requirements or goals that are likely to impact the story, you might want to give them a heads up. You don't need to reveal everything—sometimes it's better and more fun for players to learn about the other characters in the group through action and play (see below for more on “show, don't tell”).

In fact, it's okay to have a secret or two. Your character's backstory might revolve around the fact that their mother was an evil necromancer, but if that's not something your character would likely bring up, don't share it. Let it come out later in the campaign, perhaps at a dramatic moment—that's the kind of thing where you can work with the GM to develop a prominent storyline, if that's something you both want.

SHOW, DON'T TELL

New writers are advised all the time to “show, don't tell.” Basically, it means don't tell the reader that the mountains in the distance are beautiful—describe them and let the readers see for themselves. This isn't a bad approach to playing your character. It's much more important to show the other people at the table that your character is crafty and sneaky than to tell them. There's nothing wrong with telling them, but follow it up with actions in the course of play that back up your assertions. Actions are more memorable than words. They make a bigger impression. You can talk about your character at length, but at the

end of the session, the other players will remember what your character actually did.

DEVELOP A VOICE

Lots of players use a different voice for their character—one that's higher or lower in pitch, or maybe has an accent (dwarves are often Scottish, for whatever reason). That's cool, but it's not a talent that everyone has. So that's not what I'm describing here. No, instead, I mean "voice" in the writerly sense, once again. You know how when you're reading fiction and the author tells you what a character said, and then tells you who said it? *"Get out of here, jerkface," Carlo said.* Well, a good writer doesn't have to tell you that Carlo said that, because the writer will have made Carlo such a clearly defined character in your mind that there's no question whether a line comes from him or someone else, regardless of attribution. You know Carlo always calls his friend Allen "jerkface," for example.

In a perfect world, you'll do the same with your character. There won't be any need to tell the other players that you're speaking as your character if your character has a well-defined voice.

Voice encapsulates background, education level, attitude, and emotions. Does your character use a lot of slang and contractions, or are they more formal? Do they get easily offended or angry? Are they gruff or long-winded—or something else entirely? Do they always stick up for what they perceive as being right? Do they frequently bring most conversations around to their love of pastries? These are all part of the voice that I'm referring to.

STORY OVER CHARACTER

Remember earlier, when I wrote that as a player, you're one of the storytellers too? That figures into the game experience in many ways.

While you want your character to succeed at their goals, even more important, you (the player) want to succeed at *your* goals. Your main



goal should be having fun and telling a good story. And in a good story, characters sometimes fail.

To some degree, the point here is to not let failure bother you too much. Great stories can come out of failure. But there's more to it than that, at least for experienced players. Sometimes, you want to fail because of the great story it will produce.

This is the kind of situation where a player's goals and the character's goals aren't the same thing. A player might want their character to fall from grace and be thrown down into the dirt, only so they can eventually redeem themselves and rise up again, better and stronger than before. That is, after all, an archetypal story model.

It's commonly used because writers understand that sometimes a character must be brought low to evoke the full range of emotions in the audience. You feel sympathy and pathos when the character in a story you're reading or watching fails, which is just as emotional as the joy or triumph you feel when they succeed. Perhaps it's their own hubris that brings them down, or maybe it's just an overwhelming obstacle they face, and thus they must learn to try to overcome it in a different way.

An interesting thing about RPGs is that, as a participant, you're both storyteller and part of the audience. You and your group are telling stories for yourselves and each other. But we get so caught up in looking at things from our character's point of view (that's what we're supposed to do, after all!) that we forget about the "audience." We forget that it's not just about our character's success, but about the group's overall enjoyment of the story and the emotions (both highs and lows) it evokes.

Thus, you put story over character. You put your goals ahead of your character's goals (which is obviously fine, given that you're real and your character is fictional).

Or, rather, perhaps this *is* still putting character first, but it's the long view of the character. If your character emerges at the end better than they started, and it's because of failure or defeat, then it's still about what's best for the character. Even if it hurts a little in the short term.

How to Handle Failure

When your character fails at a small matter—you make a bad die roll and fail to climb over a wall, or miss your foe in combat—shrug it off and move on. You probably won't even remember the event ten minutes later.

When your character fails in a large matter—you fail to recover the stolen gold, or the diplomat you're guarding is murdered—take a deep breath. It's unpleasant, but you know what? Surviving without that gold or avenging the dead diplomat will springboard you and your group into a whole new story, and it will be a good one. Further, the feeling of satisfaction when you succeed next time will be all the greater.

When your character fails catastrophically—you die, your friend dies, or the whole city is buried by the erupting volcano you accidentally conjured—that's a key story moment for the whole campaign. Don't despair (at least not in real life—your character is likely despairing, if they're still alive). You just created an opportunity for epic storytelling. If you have to undo the catastrophe, avenge a fallen comrade, or even die a heroic death yourself, you're telling an awesome story, and that is very likely an important turning point.

This doesn't mean your character can't react appropriately to the loss or defeat. Just don't let the game come to a halt because of failure. Figure out what to do next. Have your character dust themselves off. Mourn. Drown their sorrows. Swear vengeance. Have a funeral. If your character died, start coming up with an idea for a new character.

The show must go on.

For more on handling death in the game, see 228.

Finding a Voice for Your Character

by Alina Pete

One of the challenges faced by players and GMs alike is confusion between what is said out of character (by the players) and what is said in character, especially when multiple NPCs are involved. An easy way to distinguish between these is to have some kind of special voice or mannerism for your character. However, not every player feels confident doing funny voices or accents.

This doesn't have to be an actual change in your voice, however. You can try changing your posture when you speak as your character, hunching down to play a shy person or pulling your shoulders back to play a proud knight, for example. You can change the pacing of your speech, speaking more slowly or quickly than usual, or adding pauses to your sentences ("I . . . would not . . . do that . . . if I were you").

Don't go too far, though, or it could be difficult to understand what you're saying. The key is to change your style of speaking just enough to make it clear that it's your character talking, not you. It's also important that the voice or mannerism is one you can maintain easily, since you'll be speaking as your character regularly.

If you're not comfortable with speaking or acting differently, you could use a hand sign (like crossing your fingers in front of you or placing your hand on a picture of your character) to indicate when you're speaking in character. Alternately, you could use simple props, like different hats or accessories (something easily swapped out), particularly to distinguish between multiple NPCs.

It can feel embarrassing to try speaking in a different voice! To break the ice, I like to have my group try a few voices together before we start a new campaign or whenever a new player joins the game. Some fun suggestions could be to "act like a goblin" or "talk like a pirate" or spend a few minutes reading funny tweets out loud as famous cartoon characters.

You can also practice your character's voice on your own. Try reading your favorite book or poem aloud as your character, or write a journal in your character's voice if you're not comfortable speaking as them out loud. And if you're stuck trying to come up with a voice, listen to some voice actors and try emulating some of their characters.

Some easier voices and mannerisms to try:

- ☞ Use a stage whisper for characters who speak quietly or have raspy, inhuman voices.
- ☞ Put a finger beside your lips or on your temple as you speak in character to indicate telepathic or nonverbal speech.
- ☞ Add a sneer or "heh" to the end of your sentences to make your character seem untrustworthy.
- ☞ Try to talk while keeping your top and bottom teeth together. This will drastically change how you speak and is useful for stiff-faced creatures like robots, lizardfolk, or golems.



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CHAPTER 6: EVERYONE'S FAVORITE PLAYER

If there is something aspirational about playing roleplaying games, it's probably not what you might think. Campaigns are often "about" completing a quest or a mission. Game systems often revolve around earning points or advantages to make your character more and more powerful. But these are short-term goals at best. If you're in this hobby for the long haul (that is to say, beyond making one character or playing in one campaign), you'll see that these drivers aren't really what to aspire to as a player. Sure, it's fun to say that you killed some super tough monster or you attained a very high level, but honestly, no one cares that much. It just seems like they do. These are momentary victories. They have no value once you've wrapped up the game session and packed up your stuff to go home.

What people really care about, and what you should really care about, is having fun. Was slaying the dragon and looting its vast hoard fun? Great. The fun's the important part. Did you reach 17th level through a series of really fun adventures and enjoyable game sessions? Awesome. That's the point.

Let me reiterate, because this is important. Slaying the dragon and reaching 17th level aren't the point. They aren't the end goal. They're a means to an end, and that end is enjoying yourself with your friends. You're here for the storytelling. The fun. And the social interaction with people you like to spend time with. The dice, the stats, and all of that is just one part of the fun.

So, great. You're in it for the fun. How do you keep having fun? Keep getting invited back to more games. And how do you do that? How do you ensure that if anyone you know is putting together a new game, you're at the top of the invite list?

You become everyone's favorite player.

Your goal should be to be a person who is a joy to game with. One who is a delight to invite into someone else's home. You want your GM

to be grateful that you're sitting at their table. You want the other players to be thrilled that you're joining them.

This isn't a difficult goal to achieve. But it does take conscious attention on your part.

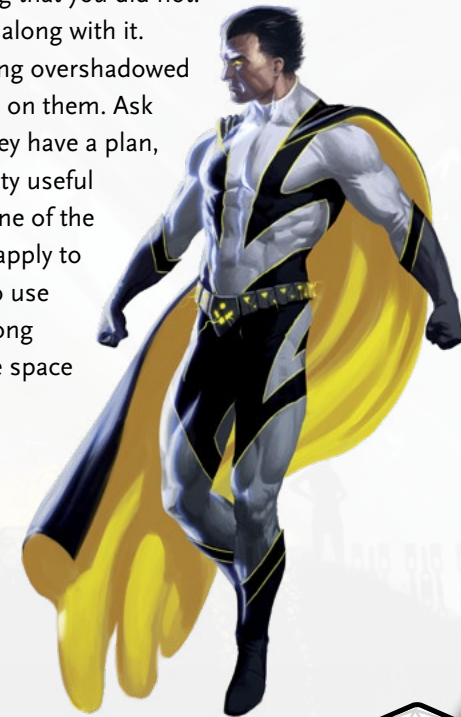
FACILITATE THE FUN

Games are meant to be fun, and if you do things that encourage the fun inherent in the game, you'll make it more fun for everyone, including yourself.

Cheer when someone else succeeds at an important task. Never be grumpy that they got to accomplish something that you did not. When someone comes up with a fun plan, go along with it.

If you notice that one of the players is being overshadowed by the actions of another, focus your attention on them. Ask them what they want to do next. Find out if they have a plan, or perhaps if their character has a special ability useful in the current situation. Or, if you know that one of the other characters has a cool ability that would apply to the situation but they don't seem to be able to use it (either because of action in the game or strong personalities at the table), try to give them the space to do so.

If you notice that the current action in the game (or at the table) is bothering, boring, or otherwise causing negative feelings for a player, try to change things up. Be their advocate without necessarily even drawing attention to them, because maybe they don't want to speak up for themselves.



HELP THE OTHER CHARACTERS

Play a character the other characters are grateful to have around. Share your healing resources, protect wounded or vulnerable characters in danger, be generous with your money and supplies, and use your special abilities to bolster the actions of others.

You might say, “But that’s not the kind of character I’m playing. They’re selfish/cowardly/inattentive/etc.” Well, that may be, but if you want to be everyone’s favorite player, either don’t play those kinds of characters, or figure out how to play that character and still be helpful. If everyone sees your fearful character working to overcome their fears so they can help another character who’s in danger, that will make an impression (maybe even more than just an overtly helpful character).

Don’t always be the person who has to slay the monster. Use your actions to facilitate someone else killing the monster sometimes. Cast your spell that increases strength on someone else so they can break down the barrier. Let someone else have the antigravity belt so they can fly up to the ceiling and explore the secret hatch there. You can be the one who gets the focus next time.

HELP THE OTHER PLAYERS (AND THE GM)

Is one of the other players struggling to understand a rules system or manage their character’s abilities? Don’t make it the GM’s duty to deal with that. Instead, quietly explain how a rule works or provide helpful advice on what to do (while still letting the player make the decisions for their character). Do this as an aside—don’t bring the whole table’s activities to a halt when you do this.

If someone had to get up from the table in the middle of the game, quietly fill them in on what they missed. Again, the point here is to let the GM keep doing what they’re doing, so don’t disrupt play when you do this.

Lend your dice or your pen to someone who needs it. If you get up from the table to get a drink or snack, ask if anyone else needs anything while you’re up.

Be a good friend in real life to the people sitting at the table with you. (More on this below.)

BE CURIOUS AND INTERESTED

I have a player in my game group named Bruce and I tell everyone that he’s always welcome at any game I run because he’s always intrigued. When exploring a new place, he doesn’t want to leave any part unexamined—he’s always interested in what’s behind the next door. If the PCs encounter a threat, he wants to deal with it. If they find a new spell, he wants to learn it. Bruce’s enthusiasm for the fictional situation at hand always keeps things moving forward.

When the GM introduces a mystery, be interested whether it’s a whodunit or simply “What’s on the other side of that dungeon door?” Let your curiosity drive your actions—be invested in the outcome. It’s gratifying to the GM, and your attentiveness will get the other players interested. Your group won’t sit around wondering what to do next. On the contrary, it’s more likely that your problem will be too many interesting avenues to discover.

If there’s an NPC with a lot to tell you about the setting, listen. Ask questions. Interact. If you find out about a previously unknown (to you) facet of the fictional world, try to learn more. The GM has worked hard on this stuff, and your interest is all the reward they need.

Pay attention when it’s not your turn. When it is your turn, be ready to act immediately, rather than holding things up with indecision or a lack of preparation. This means that when you’re going to use a special ability and you’re not entirely sure how it works, look it up in the rulebook before it’s your turn again so you’re ready with the needed information. Don’t make the GM pause the game to look it up for you.

Show the players the same attention and interest that you show the GM. Know their characters. Try to recall an interesting tidbit from their backstory that they told you, and bring it up when it’s relevant. Talk about their past exploits in character in the same way that you’d talk about

shared memories with your real-life friends. “This reminds me of when you got that Imperial officer drunk so we could reprogram all the robots in his sector!”

There’s so much to engage with in an RPG that all this is really easy.

BE CREATIVE

Don’t do the same thing over and over again each turn. Come up with an interesting and novel solution to a problem. Confront a challenge in a whole new way. If you need to steal the queen’s necklace, don’t just break in—use a disguise or a ruse to get into her chamber when she’s not there. If you need to defeat a group of robots, try to figure out if there’s a way to scramble their electronic brains rather than just blasting them one by one.

However, realize that the traditional way might also be the fun way. Sometimes, simply swimming across the river or convincing the police you weren’t at the scene of the crime is the way to go. Sure, it’s straightforward, but it gets the job done (and it’s still a fun part of the game). In fact, with this in mind, maybe you should save the creative solutions for when the traditional method is growing stale. The *third* time you run into a guard patrol, that’s when you bring out your plan to trick them into running into the giant spider’s web rather than fighting them.

Further, don’t suggest things that you know the rest of the group won’t enjoy. If the other players love fighting bad guys, don’t come up with a way to avoid all the combats in a session—that’s less fun for them, not more. If one player loves using their skill to pick locks, don’t insist on smashing down every door.



BE A GREAT GUEST

If the game session is in someone else’s home, do things that will make you a welcome guest.

Don’t be late. Being late means that everyone has to wait for you to start, and probably means that the entire session is shorter than it would have been if you had arrived on time. Less time equals less fun for everyone. But don’t be really early, either. If the game starts at seven o’clock, and that’s the only information you have, the host has basically said that you’ll be welcome there starting at 7:00. So show up as close to that time as you can. However, if the group wants to *start playing* at 7:00, the assumption might be that everyone shows up fifteen to twenty minutes early to get settled, unpack their stuff, chat, and so on. So find out what “starting at seven o’clock” really means, and meet that expectation.

Be prepared. Don’t be the person who’s always got to borrow dice or a pencil. If it’s an ongoing campaign, get your own copy of the rulebook and bring it with you so you don’t have to borrow someone else’s copy.

Bring snacks or drinks for the others. You don’t have to provide everything for everyone, but if someone else brings snacks (or the host provides them), bring some sodas or beers or whatever the group likes to drink. If someone brought chips last week, tell them that you’ll be happy to bring a snack this time, and then ask everyone what they like. Don’t bring something just for yourself unless that’s what everyone in the group has agreed to do or you’ve got specific dietary needs. Bringing a snack or drink just for you is almost worse than bringing nothing at all.

Be considerate. If kids or roommates are asleep, keep your voice down. If half the players are vegetarians, don’t bring beef jerky for the group to snack on. If the host has young children, or there are kids or sensitive players in the game, don’t use inappropriate language or bring up inappropriate topics.

Offer to help clean up. Most people don’t have a dedicated gaming space. The rest of the week, they use the table you’ve been gaming on all evening to eat dinner, do homework, or pay bills. If it’s cluttered with books, pens, papers, miniatures, or what have you, *someone’s* got to

clear all that off and put it away. Even if it's not your house, you can help. Further, if there are a bunch of plates and glasses everyone's just used, someone's got to wash them or at least put them in the dishwasher.

BE A GREAT HOST

If you're having the game at your house or apartment, make your home as welcoming and comfortable for the other gamers as you can. For more on hosting games, see Chapter 15: Hosting the Game, page 205.

BE A GOOD FRIEND

In the words of a great philosopher: don't be a dick.

You're engaging in this activity with people you like, and you want them to like you. In that light, consider the following tips:

- ☹️ Avoid controversial or sensitive topics around people who might be bothered by them.
- ☹️ Use language that's appropriate for everyone in earshot. Don't swear around kids if their parents don't want you to. Don't loudly describe how your character eviscerated the demon lord last session when the host's grandmother is in the room (unless she's interested).
- ☹️ Make sure your personal hygiene habits are up to snuff. Sure, gaming is super casual, but you're still spending multiple hours in the same room with a bunch of other people. You want to be presentable, and you don't want to offend with your appearance or odor.
- ☹️ Be sure everyone listening cares about what you're saying. Your friends might be utterly fascinated with your opinions on which Doctor on *Doctor Who* was the best, or maybe they don't even watch the show. Keep an eye out for how interested everyone seems when you're talking about something other than what's going on in the game.
- ☹️ Avoid spoilers. Lots of gamers love similar books, movies, and shows, and if you've seen or read something before everyone else, don't ruin it for them. Err on the side of not saying anything. If you find yourself about to say the words, "I don't think this is a spoiler, but . . ." you're about to spoil something.
- ☹️ Be a good listener. Conversation is a two-way street, and other people have interesting things to say too. Remember, when you're speaking, you learn nothing, but when you listen, you can learn a lot.
- ☹️ Know when to be serious and when to be silly. There's a time for both. Read the room.
- ☹️ Don't always try to one-up everyone. If you find yourself replying to someone else's story with "That's nothing, listen to this . . ." just stop. The person who insists on being the best or most interesting one in the group is probably *not* everyone's favorite person.
- ☹️ Try not to be critical of the other players in the group, the GM, the game, the host's home, and so on. Constructive comments are okay, but only if you know they're welcome (and only if you're open to them as well). When in doubt, keep your critical thoughts to yourself.
- ☹️ To take it a step further, try not to be overly negative in general. People enjoy being around positive people. It's good to like things, and to express your positive feelings about what you like. Negative feelings and opinions are okay, but try to make them the exception rather than the rule whenever possible.
- ☹️ Apologize if you make a mistake, and don't dwell on it.
- ☹️ Consider your own well-being and your own limits. If you're not feeling well or not up for the game, staying home is probably the right thing to do. Better to be an absent player than one who drags down the game because they're under the weather, grumpy, or exhausted.

CHAPTER 7: CHARACTER ARCS AND PLAYER BONDS

This chapter details a few options that can be used in practically any roleplaying game to help make for deeper characters and stories. You might consider adopting these in your favorite game.

CHARACTER ARCS

Character arcs can bring more great stories and more character depth and development to your game. They're appropriate for campaign play, but probably not for a one-shot game.

Just like in a book or a television show, characters in a game progress through their own personal stories and change over time. Rather than following a quest given by an NPC, a PC with a character arc decides for themselves what they do and why. Character arcs are like stated goals for a character, and by progressing toward that goal, a character advances. The key word there is *progressing*. You don't have to achieve the goal to earn advancement—it's not an all-or-nothing prospect. Each arc is keyed to a single character, but just like in a book or TV show, each character can take part in the larger story arc that the whole group participates in, while also progressing in their own personal arc.

This section presents sample character arcs, but you can create your own too. These examples are intentionally broad to encompass many different characters and stories. For example, "Revenge" is a very simple and straightforward character arc. ("Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die!") The player who chooses this arc for their character decides who they want revenge on and why. It's up to the players and the GM to make the details fit.

USING CHARACTER ARCS FOR ADVANCEMENT

To use character arcs, you need to convert them to whatever reward system your game uses. This might take a little approximation on your part. Consider what a character typically earns in a single game session. Think of this as a "small reward" and double that as a "large reward." For example, if a character in your game earns 1,000 experience points on average per session, you can think of references in the following material to a "small reward" as being about 1,000 experience points and a "large reward" as being 2,000 experience points. If, however, your game doesn't use that kind of system and (for example) allows players to increase two or three skills after a session, consider that a "small reward." Increasing four or five skills might be a "large reward."

Taking a new arc has a cost in terms of this kind of advancement reward. In a session where the character adopts a new arc, simply have them forgo whatever reward they would have earned that session, if applicable.

Going forward, use the rewards that come from character arcs rather than experience points or whatever system your game normally uses. In other words, progressing through character arcs becomes the way characters advance.

The write-up of each arc describes the parts involved in progressing through the arc:

Opening: This sets the stage for the arc. It involves some action, although that might just be the PC agreeing to do the task or undertake the mission. This part usually has no reward, but half a small reward (if applicable) might be appropriate.

Step(s): This is the action required to move toward the climax. In story terms, this is the movement through the bulk of the arc. It's the journey. The rising tension. There might be only one step, or there might be many, depending on the story told. Each results in a small reward.

Climax: This is the finale—the point at which the PC succeeds or fails at what they've set out to do. Not every arc ends with victory. If the character is successful, they earn a large reward. If they fail, they still earn a small reward. If a character fails the climax, they very likely ignore the resolution.

Resolution: This is the wrap-up or denouement. It's a time for the character to reflect on what happened, tie up any loose ends, and figure out what happens next. When things are more or less resolved, the character earns a small reward.

YOUR FIRST ARC

When you create your character, you can choose one character arc at no cost. Players have the option to not choose one at the beginning, but it's probably a good idea to do so. First and foremost, it defines your character. If you begin the campaign out to find the woman who killed your brother, that says a lot about you: you had a brother, he was likely close to you, he had been in at least one dangerous situation, and you're probably motivated at least somewhat by anger and hate. Even after you finish this first arc, you'll undoubtedly have (at least one) more because you will gain new arcs as the campaign progresses.

You choose an arc for your character, and as they progress through the parts of the arc, they earn whatever method your game uses to reflect that progress—experience points, character points, or what have you, as described above. The rewards lead to advancement for your character. At the end of a session, review the actions you took and describe how they might equate to the completion of a step (or possibly more than one step) in your character arc. If everyone agrees, the character gets their reward.

Most arcs have some kind of opening, climax, and resolution, in that order. As for the steps—the action that represents the journey through the arc—some of them are probably optional, depending on the situation. These steps between the opening and the climax can be done in any order.

Character arcs should always take at least weeks of game time, and no more than two steps in an arc should be accomplished in a game session (and most of the time, it should be one step, if any). If neither of these two things is true, it's not really a character arc. You can't, for example, use the Creation arc to guide you through something you can make in an hour or two.

Bonded characters (see page 86) can share character arcs. In other words, two close friends can set out to undo the same wrong, train the same creature, or solve the same mystery.

GAINING NEW ARCS

Once play begins, players can still take on a new arc whenever they wish, and there's no limit to how many a character can have (within reason). However, as mentioned above, arcs have a beginning cost that must be paid, reflecting the character's devotion to the goal. The character will earn this investment back (probably many times over) if the arc is completed.

Character arcs are always driven by players. A GM cannot force one on a character. That said, the events in the narrative often present story arc opportunities and inspire arcs for characters. It's certainly in the GM's purview to suggest possible arcs related to what's going on. For example, if the GM presents an encounter in which an NPC wishes to learn from the PC, it might make sense to suggest taking the Instruction arc. Whether or not the PC agrees to teach the student, the player doesn't have to adopt the Instruction arc unless they want to.

COMMON CHARACTER ARCS

The following are general guidelines for common character arcs that you can choose for your character. Because the arcs are frameworks in which to build an individual character's stories, they are very general. If you and the GM want to make a new one, it should be fairly easy after looking through these models.

AID A FRIEND

Someone needs your help.

When a PC friend takes a character arc, you can select this arc to help them with whatever their arc is (if appropriate). The steps and climax depend entirely on their chosen arc. If the friend is an NPC, the steps and climax are lifted from another arc appropriate to whatever they seek to do.

It's difficult, but possible, to aid a friend with an arc even if that friend is unwilling to accept (or is ignorant of) your help.

The cost and rewards for a character with this arc are the same as those described in the original character arc.

Opening: Answering the Call. Offering to help (or responding to a request for help).

Step(s) and Climax: Depends on the friend's arc. Rewards are the same for you as for the friend.

Resolution: You speak with your friend and learn if they are satisfied. Together, you share what you've learned (if anything) and where you will go from here.

ASSIST AN ORGANIZATION

You set out to accomplish something that will further the goals of an organization. You're probably allied with them or they are rewarding you for your help in some fashion.

Opening: Responding to the Call. You work out all the details of what's expected of you, and what rewards (if any) you might get. You also learn the specifics of what's required to join and advance.

Step: Sizing up the Task. This requires some action. A reconnaissance mission. An investigation.

Step(s): Undertaking the Task. Because this arc can vary so widely based on the task involved, there might be multiple steps like this one.

Climax: Completing the Task.

Resolution: Collecting your reward (if any) and conferring with the people in the organization that you spoke to. Perhaps getting access to

higher-ranking people in the organization. You can choose to increase your connection to the organization rather than take the standard reward.

AVENGE

Someone close to you or important to you in some way has been wronged. The most overt version of this arc would be to avenge someone's death. Avenging is different than revenge, as revenge is personal—you are the wronged party. But in the Avenge character arc, you are avenging a wrong done to someone else.

Opening: Declaration. You publicly declare that you are going to avenge the victim(s). This is optional.

Step(s): Tracking the Guilty. You track down the guilty party. This might not mean physically finding them if you already know where they are. Instead, it might be discovering a way to get at them if they are distant, difficult to reach, or well protected. This step might be repeated multiple times, if applicable.

Step: Finding the Guilty. You finally find the guilty party, or find a path or make a plan to reach them. Now all that's left is to confront them.

Climax: Confrontation. You confront the guilty party. This might be a public accusation and demonstration of guilt, a trial, or an attack to kill, wound, or apprehend them—whatever you choose to be appropriate.

Resolution: You resolve the outcome and the ramifications of the confrontation and decide what to do next.

BIRTH

You are becoming a parent.

The Birth character arc assumes that you already have a partner or a surrogate. If you want your character to find a romantic partner or spouse, you can use the Romance arc. And, of course, nonhuman characters might reproduce in other ways. Dragonpeople, for example, might hatch out of eggs.

This arc is usually followed by the Raise a Child arc.

Opening: Impregnation.

Step: Finding a Caretaker. This might be a physician, midwife, doula, or similar person. This is optional.

Step: Complication. A complication arises that threatens the pregnancy, the mother, or both.

Step: Preparation. You prepare a place for the delivery as well as a safe place for the infant to live once born.

Climax: Delivery. The baby is born. Success means the child survives.

Resolution: You get the baby to the place you have prepared and settle in, deciding what to do next.

BUILD

You are going to build a physical structure—a house, a fortress, a workshop, a defensive wall, and so on. This arc can also cover renovating an existing structure or substantially adding to one. Of course, this doesn't have to mean physical construction. You might build something with spells or other supernatural abilities.

Opening: Make a Plan. This almost certainly involves literally drawing up blueprints or plans.

Step(s): Find a Site. This might be extremely straightforward—a simple examination of the site—or it might be an entire exploratory adventure. (If the latter, it might involve multiple such steps.)

Step(s): Gather Materials. Depending on what you're building and what it's made out of, this could involve multiple steps. There probably are substantial costs involved as well.

Step(s): Construction. Depending on what you're building, this could involve multiple steps. It might also take a considerable amount of time and work.

Climax: Completion. The structure is finished.

Resolution: You put the structure to its desired use and see if it holds up.



CLEANSE

Someone or something has been contaminated, probably by evil spirits, radiation, a deadly virus, foul magic, or the like, and you want to rid them of such influences or contaminants. This could also be a curse, a possession, an infestation, or something else.

Opening: Analyzing the Threat. You determine the nature of the contamination.

Step: Find the Solution. Almost every contamination has its own particular solution, and this likely involves research and consultation.

Step: Getting Ready. The solution probably involves materials, spells, or other things that you must gather and prepare.

Climax: The Cleansing. You confront the contamination.

Resolution: You reflect on the events that transpired and what effects they might have on the future. How can you keep this from happening again?

CREATION

You want to make something. It might be a magic item, a painting, a novel, or a machine.

Opening: Make a Plan. You figure out what you need, what you're going to do, and how you're going to do it.

Step(s): Gather Materials. Depending on what you're creating and what it's made out of, this could involve multiple steps. There probably are substantial costs involved as well.

Step(s): Progress. Depending on what you're creating, this could involve multiple steps. It might also take a considerable amount of time and work.

Climax: Completion. It's finished! Is it what you wanted? Does it work?

Resolution: You think about what you have learned from the process and use or enjoy the fruits of your labor.

DEFEAT A FOE

Someone stands in your way or is threatening you. You must overcome the challenge they represent. Defeat doesn't always mean killing or even fighting them. Defeating a foe could mean beating them in a chess match or in competition for a desired mentor.

Opening: Sizing up the Competition.

Step: Investigation. This requires some action. A reconnaissance mission. An investigation.

Step(s): Diving In. You travel toward your opponent, overcome their lackeys, or take steps to reach them so you can confront them. This step can take many forms, and there might be more than one such step. This step is always active.

Climax: Confrontation. The contest, challenge, fight, or confrontation occurs.

Resolution: You reflect on what you've learned and what the consequences of your actions might be.

DEFENSE

A person, place, or thing is threatened, and you want to protect it.

Opening: Analyze the Situation. What are you defending, and what threats are involved?

Step: Account for Your Resources. How are you going to defend?

Step(s): Fend Off Danger. The forces threatening what you are protecting probably make an initial threat that you'll have to defeat. It's not the main threat, though. There might be multiple such initial threats.

Climax: Protect. The true threat reveals itself and you confront it.

Resolution: A time for reflection on everything that occurred, and an assessment of the person, place, or thing's safety going forward.

DEVELOP A BOND

You want to get closer to another character. This might be to make a friend, find a mentor, or establish a contact in a position of power. It might be to turn a friend into a much closer friend. The character might be an NPC or a PC. In the case of a PC, it's a PC bond (see page 86).

Opening: Getting to Know You. You learn what you can about the other character.

Step: Initial Attempt. You attempt to make contact. This might involve sending messages or gifts through a courier, using an intermediary, or just going up and saying hello, depending on the situation.

Step(s): Building a Relationship. There might be many such steps as you develop the relationship.

Climax: Bond. You succeed or fail at forging the bond.

Resolution: You enjoy the fruits of your new relationship.

ENTERPRISE

You want to create and run a business or start an organization. Maybe you're a craftsperson who wants to sell your creations. Maybe you like baking and you want to start a catering service. Or maybe you want to start a secret society or found a school to teach young mutants how to use their powers. You'll almost certainly have to make new connections, find (and somehow pay for) a location, and deal with all manner of administrative duties.

Opening: Drawing up a Plan. What's your goal, and how are you going to achieve it?

Step: Account for Your Resources. How much financing does the enterprise need compared to what you've got? If you need more, how will you get it? How many people other than yourself are needed to begin, and how many will you need to sustain things once they are up and running?

Step: Finding a Location. You probably need a place to run your enterprise—a store, a workshop, a base of operations, or what have you. You find a location and look into what it will take to buy or rent it.

Step(s): Building the Enterprise. You procure the needed equipment or personnel. You make the connections and deals to get things started. You obtain important permits or other legal documents. You test new products. You actually start the business. Each of these developments (and likely others) can be counted as one step, so there will be many steps.

Climax: Profit and Loss. You determine whether your enterprise will take off and carry on into the future, or fall apart before it gets a chance to blossom. This occurs in a single dramatic moment—your first major client, your organization's first big meeting or mission, or whatever is appropriate.

Resolution: A time for reflection on everything that occurred, and how you're going to move forward.

ESTABLISHMENT

You want to prove yourself as someone of importance. This can take many forms—socially, financially, or even romantically.

Opening: Assessment. You assess yourself as well as who you need to prove yourself to.

Step(s): Appearances Matter. You improve your look. Enhance your wardrobe. Spruce up your house. Whatever it takes to get attention from the right people. There might be many such steps.

Step(s): Self-Aggrandizement. You need to get the word out to start people talking about you. There might be many such steps.

Climax: Grabbing Attention. You do something big, like host a party for influential people or produce a play that you wrote. You make a big splash or a big crash.

Resolution: You reflect on what you did and where you go from here.

EXPLORE

Something out there is unknown and you want to explore its secrets. This is most likely an area of wilderness, a new planet, an otherworldly dimension, or something similar.

Opening: Make a Plan. Not only do you draw up a plan for your exploration, but if appropriate, you also make a formal declaration to relevant parties of what you're going to do.

Step(s): Gather Resources. You get the supplies, vehicles, and help you need. Depending on where you're going and what's required, this could involve multiple steps. There probably are substantial costs involved as well.

Step(s): Travel. You go where you wish to explore. There might be many such steps, depending on how long it takes to get there.

Step(s): Exploration. This is the meat of the arc, but it's probably a series of small moves and minor victories. There might be many such steps.

Climax: Conquest. You make the big discovery or truly master the area. You might not have explored every inch of the place, but if you are successful, you can claim to be done.

Resolution: You return home and possibly share your findings.

**FALL FROM GRACE**

This is an odd character arc in that it's (presumably) not something that a character would want. It is something that a player selects on a meta level for the character because it makes for an interesting story. It also sets up the potential for future arcs, such as Redemption. It's important that this arc involve actions you take. For example, you fall into substance abuse. You treat people badly. You make mistakes that endanger others. In other words, the fall isn't orchestrated by someone else—it's all your own doing.

Opening: The Descent. Things go bad.

Step(s): Further Descent. Things get worse. Depending on the situation, this might involve many steps.

Step: Lashing Out. You treat others poorly as you descend.

Climax: Rock Bottom. There is no chance for success here. Only failure.

Resolution: You wallow in your own misery.

FINISH A GREAT WORK

Something that was begun in the past must now be completed. This might involve destroying an evil artifact, finishing the construction of a monument, developing the final steps of a cure for a disease, or uncovering a lost temple forgotten to the ages.

Opening: Assessing the Past. You look at what has come before and where it still needs to go. This almost certainly involves some real research.

Step: Conceive a Plan. You make a plan on how to move forward.

Step(s): Progress. You make significant progress or overcome a barrier to completion. This may involve multiple such steps.

Climax: Completion. This involves the big finish to the past work.

Resolution: You reflect on what you did and where you go from here.

GROWTH

Willingly or unwillingly, you are going to change. This is another meta arc. It's less about a goal and more about character development. While it's possible that the growth involved is intentional, in most people's lives and stories, it is emergent. A character might become less selfish, braver, a better leader, or experience some other form of growth.

Opening: The Beginning. Change usually begins slowly, in a small, almost imperceptible way.

Step(s): Change. Growth involves many small steps.

Step: Overcoming an Obstacle. The temptation to resort to your old ways is always present.

Climax: Self-Evident Change. This is a dramatic about-face. This is the moment where you do something the "old you" would never have done, and it has a profound effect on you and those around you. Either with success or failure, growth is possible.

Resolution: You recognize the change in yourself and move forward.

INSTRUCTION

You teach a pupil. You have knowledge on a topic and are willing to share. This can be a skill, an area of lore, a combat style, or the use of a special ability. This is usually a fairly long-term arc. Sometimes teaching a pupil is a side matter, and sometimes the pupil takes on more of an apprentice role and spends a great deal of time with you, traveling with you and perhaps even living in your house (or you living in theirs).

Opening: Taking on the Student.

Step: Getting to Know Them. You assess your pupil's strengths and weaknesses and try to get an idea of what they need to learn and how you can teach it to them.

Step(s): The Lessons. Teaching is often a slow, gradual process.

Step: Breakdown. Many times, a student needs to have a moment of crisis to really learn something. Maybe they get dejected, or maybe they rebel against your teaching techniques.

Climax: Graduation. This is when you recognize that the pupil has learned what they need. It usually comes at a dramatic moment.

Resolution: You and the pupil say your goodbyes, and you look toward the future.

JOIN AN ORGANIZATION

You want to join an organization. This might be a military organization, a corporation, a secret society, a religion, or something else.

Opening: Getting the Details. You learn all you can about the organization and how one becomes a member.

Step(s): Making a Contact. Friends on the inside are always important.

Step(s): Performing a Deed. The organization might want to test your worth, or this might be a ceremony you must take part in. It might include paying some sort of dues or fee. Or all of these things.

Climax: Proving Your Worth. This is the point at which you attempt to show the organization that they would be better off with you as a member.

Resolution: You consider your efforts and assess what your membership gets you.



JUSTICE

You try to right a wrong or bring a wrongdoer to justice.

Opening: Declaration. You publicly declare that you are going to bring justice in this situation. This is optional.

Step(s): Tracking the Guilty. You track down the guilty party, assuming there is one. This might not mean physically finding them if you already know where they are. Instead, it might be discovering a way to get at them if they are distant, difficult to reach, or well protected. This step might be repeated multiple times, if applicable.

Step: Helping the Victim. Righting a wrong does not always involve confronting a wrongdoer. Part of it might be about helping those who were wronged.

Climax: Confrontation. You confront the guilty party. This might be a public accusation and demonstration of guilt, a trial, or an attack to kill, wound, or apprehend them—whatever you choose to be appropriate.

Resolution: You resolve the outcome and ramifications of the confrontation and decide what to do next.

LEARN

You want to learn something. This isn't the same as the Uncover a Secret arc, in which you're looking for a bit of information. This is a skill or whole area of knowledge you want to gain proficiency with. This is learning a new language, how to play an instrument, or how to be a good cook. Since mechanics for learning skills likely already exist in your game system, this arc might be more narrative in nature. Thus, it's not about gaining a level or rank in climbing, but learning to be an experienced mountaineer.

Opening: Focusing on the Problem.

Step: Finding a Teacher or a Way to Teach Yourself. Now you can truly begin.

Step(s): Learn. Depending on what you're learning, this could involve one step or quite a few.

Climax: The Test. You put your new knowledge to the test in a real situation.

Resolution: You relax a bit and decide what to do next.

MASTER A SKILL

You're skilled, but you want to become the best. This arc might logically follow the Learn arc. As with the Learn arc, this can involve any kind of training at all, not just a skill.

Opening: Finding the Path. You've learned the basics. Now it's time for the advanced material.

Step: Discovering a Master. You find a master to help you become a master.

Step(s): Learn. Depending on what you're mastering, this could involve one step or quite a few.

Step: The Last Step. Eventually, you realize that even a master cannot teach you the last step. You must learn it on your own.

Climax: The Test. You put your mastery to the test in a real situation—and considering your goal, it's probably a very important situation.

Resolution: You relax a bit and decide what to do next.

MYSTERIOUS BACKGROUND

You don't know who your parents were, but you want to find out. The mystery might be something other than your parentage, but that's a common theme in this kind of arc. You want to know where you come from—there's some kind of mystery in your past.

Opening: Beginning the Search.

Step: Research. You look into your own family background, if possible.

Step(s): Investigation. You talk to people who might know. You follow clues.

Climax: Discovery. You discover the secret of your own background. You determine if what you learn is good or bad, but either way discovery means success.

Resolution: You contemplate how this new knowledge sits with you.

NEW DISCOVERY

You want to invent a new device, process, spell, or something similar. A cure for a heretofore unknown disease? An invocation with a result you've never heard of before? A method for getting into an impregnable vault? Any of these and more could be your discovery. While similar to the Creation arc and the Learn arc, the New Discovery arc involves blazing a new trail. No one can teach you what you want to know. You've got to do it on your own.

Opening: The Idea. You draw up plans for the thing you want to invent or discover.

Step: Research. You learn what people have done before and recognize where they fell short.

Step(s): Trial and Error. You test your hypothesis. This often ends in many failures before you get a success.

Climax: Eureka! It's time to put the discovery to the true test.

Resolution: You reflect on your discovery and probably compile your notes and write it all down, for posterity's sake if nothing else.

RAISE A CHILD

You raise a child to adulthood. It can be your biological child or one you adopt. It can even be a child taken under your wing, more a young protégé than a son or daughter. This is obviously a very long-term arc.

Opening: Sharing Your Home. The child now lives with you.

Step: Care and Feeding. You learn to meet the child's basic needs.

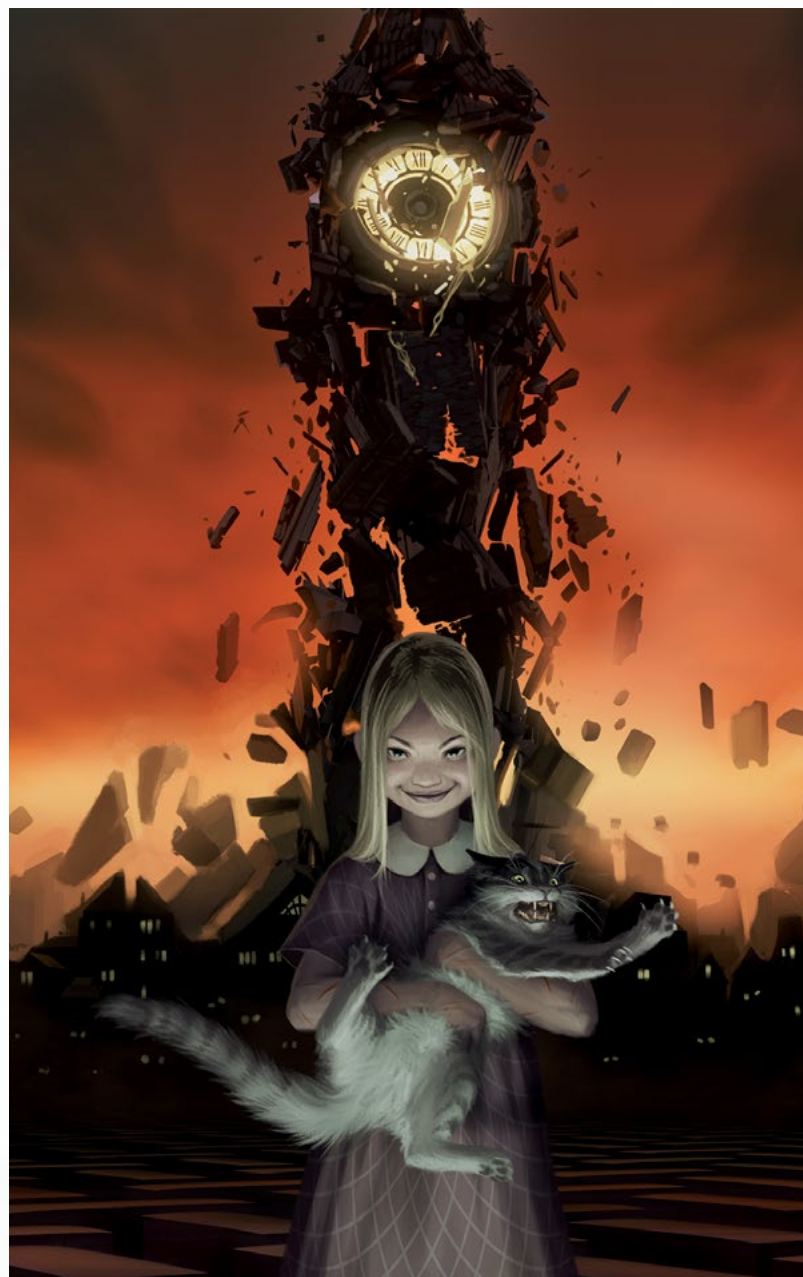
Step(s): Basic Instruction. You teach them to walk, talk, and read. You teach them to care for themselves.

Step(s): The Rewards Are Many. The child loves you. Relies on you. Trusts you. Eventually, helps you.

Step(s): Ethical Instruction. You instill your basic ethics in the child, hoping that they will mature into an adult you can be proud of.

Climax: Adulthood. At some point the child leaves the proverbial nest. You determine, at this point, your own success or failure.

Resolution: You reflect on the memories you have made.



RECOVER FROM A WOUND (OR TRAUMA)

You need to heal. This isn't just for healing simple damage (which is likely already covered in your game system). This involves recovering from a major debilitating injury, illness, or shock. Severe damage, the loss of a body part, and emotional trauma all fall into this category.

Opening: Rest. The first thing you need to do is rest.

Step: Self-Care. You take care of your own needs.

Step: Getting Aid. Someone helps.

Step: Medicine. Some kind of drug, cure, poultice, potion, or remedy aids your recovery.

Step: Therapy. With the help of someone else, you exercise your injury or cope with your trauma.

Climax: Acceptance or Recovery. You try to move on and use what has been damaged (or learn how to function without it).

Resolution: You get on with your life.

REDEMPTION

You've done something very wrong, but you want to atone and make it right again. This is like the Justice arc or the Undo a Wrong arc, except you are the wrongdoer. This could be a follow-up to the Fall From Grace arc.

Opening: Regret. You are determined to rebuild, recover, and restore.

Step: Forgiveness. You apologize and ask for forgiveness.

Step: Identifying the Needs. You determine what needs to be done to atone for your transgression.

Climax: Making Good. You perform an act that you hope will redeem your past misdeed.

Resolution: You reflect on what has happened and look to the future.

REPAY A DEBT

You owe someone something, and it's time to make good.

Opening: Debts Come Due. You determine to do what is needed to make good on the debt. It might involve repaying money, but more appropriately it's performing a deed or a series of deeds.

Step: Talking It Over. You discuss the matter with the person you owe, if possible. You ensure that what you're doing is what they want.

Climax: Repayment. Either you do something to earn the money or goods you owe, or you undertake a major task that will compensate the other person.

Resolution: You relax knowing that your debt is repaid, and you look to the future.

RESCUE

Someone or something of great importance has been taken, and you want to get them back.

Opening: Heeding the Call. You determine what has happened, and who or what is missing.

Step: Tracking. You discover who has taken them, and where.

Step: Travel. You go to where they are being held and get information on the location and who is involved. Maybe make a plan.

Climax: Rescue Operation. You go in and get them.

Resolution: You return them home.



RESTORATION

You're down but not out. You want to restore your good name. Recover what you've lost. Rebuild what has been destroyed. You've fallen down or have been knocked down, but either way you want to pick yourself up. This is a possible follow-up to the Fall From Grace arc.

Opening: Vow to Yourself. You are determined to rebuild, recover, and restore.

Step(s): Work. You rebuild, recover, and restore. If all your money was stolen, you make more money. If your house was destroyed, you rebuild it. If your reputation was tarnished, you perform deeds that restore your good name.

Climax: The Final Act. You undertake one last major task that will bring things back to where they were (or close to it). A lot is riding on this moment.

Resolution: You enjoy a return to things the way they were before.

REVENGE

Someone did something that harmed you. Unlike the Avenge arc, this arc probably isn't about tracking down a murderer, but it might involve pursuing someone who stole from you, hurt you, or otherwise brought you grief. The key is that it's personal. Otherwise, use the Justice arc.

Opening: Vow. You swear revenge.

Step(s): Finding a clue. You find a clue to tracking down the culprit.

Climax: Confrontation. You confront the culprit.

Resolution: You deal with the aftermath of the confrontation and move on. You think about whether you are satisfied by gaining your revenge.

ROMANCE

You want to strike up a relationship with a romantic partner. Perhaps you have a specific person in mind, or maybe you're just interested in a relationship in general.

Opening(s): Caught Someone's Eye. You meet someone you are interested in. (Since this can be short-lived, it's possible to have this opening occur more than once.)

Step(s): Courtship. You begin seeing the person regularly. Although not every "date" is a step in the arc, significant moments are, and there may be a few of them.

Climax: Commitment. You may or may not be interested in a monogamous relationship. Regardless, you and your love have made some kind of commitment to each other.

Resolution: You think about the future. Marriage? Children? These are only some of the possibilities.

SOLVE A MYSTERY

Different from the Learn arc and the Uncover a Secret arc, this arc is about solving a crime or a similar action committed in the fairly recent past. It's not about practice or study, but about questions and answers. In theory, the mystery doesn't have to be a crime. It might be "Why is this strange caustic substance leaking into my basement?"

Opening: Pledging to Solve the Mystery.

Step: Research. You get some background.

Step(s): Investigation. You ask questions. You look for clues. You cast divinations. This likely encompasses many such steps.

Climax: Discovery. You come upon what you believe to be the solution to the mystery.

Resolution: In this step, which is far more active than most resolutions, you confront the people involved in the mystery with what you've discovered, or you use the information in some way (such as taking it to the proper authorities).

THEFT

Someone else has something you want.

Opening: Setting Your Sights. You make a plan.

Step: Casing the Joint. You scout out the location of the thing (or learn its location).

Step(s): Getting to the Object. Sometimes, many steps are involved before you reach the object you wish to take. For example, if, in order to steal something from a vault, you need to approach one of the guards while they are off duty and bribe them to look the other way when you break in, that is covered in this step.

Climax: The Attempt. You make your heist.

Resolution: You decide what to do with the thing you've stolen and contemplate the repercussions you might face for stealing it.

TRAIN A CREATURE

You want to domesticate and train an animal or other creature. While the beast doesn't need to be wild, it must not already be domesticated and trained.

Opening: Getting Acquainted. You get to know the creature a bit, and it gets to know you.

Step: Research. You get information on the type of creature or advice from others who have trained one.

Step: Domestication. After some work, the creature is no longer a threat to you or anyone else, and it can live peacefully in your home or wherever you wish.

Step(s): Training. Each time you use this step, you teach the creature a new, significant command that it will obey regularly and immediately.

Climax: Completion. Believing the creature's training to be complete, you put it in a situation where that is put to the test.

Resolution: You reflect on the experience.

TRANSFORMATION

You want to be different in a specific way. Because the Growth arc covers internal change, this one focuses primarily on external change. This could take many forms, and probably varies greatly by genre. In some settings, it could even be death, which might turn you into a ghost. For the change to be an arc, it should be difficult and perhaps risky.

Opening: Deciding on the Transformation.

Step: Research. You look into how the change can be made and what it entails.

Step(s): Investigation. This is an active step toward making the change. It might involve getting more information, gathering materials or ingredients, or something else.

Climax: Change. You make the change, with some risk of failure or disaster.

Resolution: You contemplate how this change affects you going forward.

UNCOVER A SECRET

There is knowledge out there that you want. It could be an attempt to find and learn a specific special ability. This could also be a hunt for a lost password or key that will open a sealed door, the true name of a devil, the secret background of an important person, or how the ancients constructed a strange monolith.

Opening: Naming the Secret. You give your goal a name. "I am seeking the lost martial art of the Khendrix, who could slice steel with their bare hands."

Step(s): Research. You scour libraries and old tomes for clues and information.

Step(s): Investigation. You talk to people to gain clues and information.

Step(s): Tracking. You track down the source of the secret information and travel to it.

Climax: Revelation. You find and attempt to use the secret, whatever that entails.

Resolution: You contemplate how this secret affects you and the world.

UNDO A WRONG

Someone did something horrible, and its ramifications are still felt, even if it happened long ago. You seek to undo the damage, or at least stop it from continuing.

This is different from the Justice arc because this isn't about justice (or even revenge)—it's about literally undoing something bad that happened in the past, such as a great library being burned to the ground, a sovereign people being driven from their land, and so on.

Opening: Vowing to Put Right What Once Went Wrong.

Step: Make a Plan. You learn all you can about the situation and then make a plan to put things right.

Step(s): Progress. This is an active step toward undoing the wrong. It might involve finding something, defeating someone, destroying something, building something, or almost anything else, depending on the circumstances.

Climax: Change. You face the challenge of the former wrong, and either overcome it or fail.

Resolution: You reflect on what you've accomplished and think about the future.

Game Mastering Character Arcs

Character arcs encourage players to be proactive and create their own goals, with their own definitions of success and failure.

It's the spirit of character arcs that's important, not the specific rules. Because the arcs consist of broad sets of guidelines for handling a potentially limitless number of stories, you'll want to play fast and loose. Sometimes steps will be skipped. Sometimes they'll be repeated. Sometimes you'll go straight to the climax after the opening (this should be rare, however).

Other times, no character arc in this chapter will fit what a player wants to do. In that case, work with the player to make an arc that fits. The player's intention is what's important. Players should think of a goal for their character first and then look at the list of arcs, rather than browse the list and feel that those are the only options. When in doubt, find the arc in this chapter that most closely fits what the player wants and massage it in a few places where needed.

One thing to keep in mind: if the arc doesn't involve at least a few steps and at least some time, it's not really a character arc. If a PC gets picked on in a bar one evening by a jerk NPC and says, "My character arc is to punch that guy in the face," that's not really a character arc. That's just an action. Character arcs require depth, thought, and, most likely, change on the PC's part.

Think of them in terms of the arcs of characters in your favorite novels or movies. When a character takes on and eventually completes a character arc, it should feel like a novel or a movie's worth of story (or at least the story of one character in the novel or movie). There should be a real feeling of accomplishment and closure at the end of an arc, but at the same time—assuming the narrative is going to continue—a sense that there's more to come. One arc often leads right into the next.

Character arcs aren't meant to be entirely solo affairs. PCs working as a group should help each other with their respective arcs from time to time. The Aid a Friend arc helps to encourage this. If one or two PCs use this arc to help another character, suddenly it's a group arc, and cohesion and cooperation will come naturally.

It's worth noting, however, that some players will want one of their character arcs to be a solitary venture. They won't want help. They might not even want the other PCs to know about it. That's okay too, but it might require that you spend some time with them playing outside of regular sessions, even if it's just through text or email.

Dancing Into the Mystery

by Tom Lommel

Tabletop RPGs fall into many genres: fantasy, horror, sci fi, superheroes, and more. But every RPG is, at its core, a mystery game: the GM presents a hook and the party sets about trying to figure out What's Going On Here.

Sometimes the mystery is as simple as “How do we kill the orcs and get their treasure?” That's okay! The key is that the cycle of play revolves around the exchange of information. It is a dance that goes back and forth between the players and the GM.

The GM gives enticing but incomplete information. (“You see a stout wooden chest.”) The players process that information and respond with action. (“I examine it for traps.”) The GM considers that response and describes the outcome, yielding more information. (“You notice a thin coating of scarlet wax that seals the entire lip of the chest.”) And the dance continues. The players take in that information, evaluate it against what they already know, and act. The GM evaluates their action, and responds. Step, twirl, step, dip, step, step, spin.

The flow of this information shapes the rhythm and direction of the game.

Too many details at once, and the party may struggle to figure out what they want to do next. Most people can process only three things at once, so if the party enters a chapel and the GM describes the altar, the statue, the reflecting pool, and the choir loft, one of those details will likely be dismissed or ignored.

Conversely, too little information starves the players of actionable intelligence. RPG culture puts a lot of emphasis on GM secrets and keeping things hidden behind a screen, but when the GM says, “You don't know” or “Nothing happens,” it fundamentally breaks the rhythm of the game. Players should not be led by the nose—not every piece of information they get must be 100% reliable or immediately relevant—but they can't act on details they don't know about, and secrets are useless if they are never revealed.

As the dance of the game continues, patterns will organically appear. The players will create theories about What's Going On Here. (“Seems like this chest is airtight, maybe there's poison gas inside.”) It's not important that the party discovers the right answer, because what you're all searching for is the *most interesting* answer. (“As your crossbow bolt breaks the seal, a hissing, misty elemental streams out . . .”) Sometimes that means abandoning what's fixed and immutable in the GM notes and altering or incorporating a theory created at the table. Nimble GMs accept the ideas offered by the players but twist them slightly so the game remains engaging. Players don't want to be 100% right all the time—that sucks the challenge out of solving the mystery. Players want to be *mostly* right, but surprised by what happens next.

The game is not about the GM outsmarting the players. The game is the GM offering a hand to the players and stepping with them, spinning, into the mysterious darkness.

PLAYER CHARACTER BONDS

One way to create a more cohesive group of PCs, and thus potentially tell more meaningful stories, is by giving two or more of the characters specific bonds. Bonds create links between characters that explain the relationship they have based on their shared past and more importantly define how they will interact in the story.

Working with the GM, players can choose any bond they wish. PC bonds should be developed in character creation, but with each respective player involved. Obviously, players should agree on their characters' relationships with one another. Character bonds assume that the PCs have known each other since well before the first session.

Most bonds are intended for two characters, but most benefit a group of more. Three or more characters could be linked with the Close Friends bond, for example.

Most characters should have only one PC bond to start the game. It's possible to develop a bond later in the narrative using the Develop a Bond character arc (see page 76).

Every bond offers both a benefit and a drawback. The idea here is that the bond shapes character choices and thus contributes to and influences the story. Two siblings are going to react to a situation differently, perhaps, than two random people will. Further, bonded characters can share character arcs. In other words, two close friends can set out to undo the same wrong, train the same creature, or solve the same mystery.

SAMPLE BONDS

To use these bonds in your own game, you will need to figure out how to fit them into the system you're using. Most of the time, this means defining what a "small bonus" to an action would be. In many games, it's a +1 bonus to a die roll, but every system is slightly different. The idea is that the benefit and drawback of the bond are meant to more or less equal each other (with perhaps a slightly more significant benefit than drawback).

The following are some PC bond types you can use. With these as examples, you might be able to come up with more on your own that fit your characters even better.

CLOSE FRIENDS

The two characters are close friends and have been for some time. They are familiar with each other's homes, general abilities, personalities, and backgrounds.

Benefit: If one friend has a connection with a group or a bond with an NPC, the other gains the benefit of that connection or bond as well. This applies to a maximum of one connection or bond per character.

Drawback: If one friend is gravely imperiled, the other loses one action in fear. The GM determines when this happens.

FATED COMPANIONS

While not friends, two characters always seem to be crossing paths. They frequently turn up at the same places at the same time. Perhaps there is a reason for all this that will become clear later.

Benefit: At some point in the narrative, fate intervenes. Each character is suddenly healed of any injuries or maladies, and both succeed on their next action, regardless of what it is (assuming it is not utterly impossible). Both characters must agree as to when this happens and have it fit their background story.

Drawback: Once the characters use the benefit, the bond is basically done.

FELLOW STUDENTS

The characters studied together and thus have known each other for a long time.

Benefit: Each character gains a special skill or appropriate ability they would not normally have. It must be the same one for both PCs.

Drawback: The characters can use the chosen skill or ability only if they are near each other.

FRIENDS FROM THE PAST

The characters have known each other for a long time. They are not only familiar with each other's homes, they are also very knowledgeable about each other's general abilities, personalities, families, and backgrounds.

Benefit: Each friend has a special connection to a group. It must be the same connection for both characters.

Drawback: If one friend is gravely imperiled, the other loses one action in fear. The GM determines when this happens.

HOUSEMATES

Two characters live in the same home. They share at least some significant space, but each probably has personal space as well. They must work out various issues. (Who pays for what? Who does the dishes?)

Benefit: Shared expenses.

Drawback: The lack of privacy.

LOVERS

The two characters are in love. They share a romantic interest in each other and feel very deeply. A lover can also be a spouse. Spouses can also be housemates, and thus have two bonds.

Benefit: When close, the lovers gain a small bonus to any action they attempt.

Drawback: If apart for more than one day, each character suffers a significant penalty. On the second day, the penalty increases, and so on.

MYSTIC BOND

Probably appropriate in a fantasy setting. The two characters are linked by a deep magical or psychic connection. Magic, energy, or karma flows from one character to the other. This is one of the rarest but also the most potent of all bonds. Only two characters can be part of this bond.

Benefit: The two characters can affect each other with spells and abilities that normally affect only themselves. Further, when the two characters are close, their mystical abilities each gain a small bonus.

Drawback: Anytime one character suffers any kind of damage, both characters suffer that damage, no matter how far apart they are.

RELATIVES

The characters are related in some way. They know more about each other than most friends could ever know.

Benefit: The characters each gain a skill, but it must be the same skill.

Drawback: When one character suffers a wound, the other suffers a mental jolt (which, depending on the game system, might be some form of mental damage).



RIVALS

Two characters share a friendly rivalry. They don't want to see the other outright fail, but each would like to succeed more than the other. The rivalry may have an overt, specific story reason as well as a general one, such as being rivals for the same romantic partner, rivals for a position in a shared organization, and so on.

Benefit: Each time one character succeeds at an action, the other is incentivized and gains a small bonus to their next action. This applies only if the characters are close enough to see each other.

Drawback: If the characters are apart for more than an hour, it takes until the next day to “recharge” the benefit power.

STEWARDSHIP

One character is in a situation where they must watch over and protect another. One might be the parent of the other, a close servant, someone who owes a life debt, or some other guardian.

Benefit: The protected character gains a small bonus to defense when the steward character is close.

Drawback: The steward character suffers a small penalty to defense when close to the protected character.

UNREQUITED BOND

One character would like to be closely bonded with the other, possibly romantically but perhaps just in friendship, but the other does not share this feeling. This, then, is a bond that affects only one PC.

Benefit: The character who would like to form a bond gains a small bonus to all actions when the other is close. The character who is uninterested in the bond, when close to the other, can move a short distance away from the other and it does not count as part of their action.

Drawback: The character who is uninterested in the bond is, as a default, never close to the other. So the character who desires the bond must always move closer to get the bonus.





PART 3: BEING A GREAT GAME MASTER



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CHAPTER 8: GAME MASTER BASICS

Being a game master (GM) is the best. You get to create cool settings and characters, devise plots, and be a big part of the creation of great stories. In the game session, you're involved in every aspect—every time each player takes their turn, you're involved in determining the chance of success or failure and the repercussions either way. You're the one with the answers and the secrets, and you get to provide them to your friends.

IF YOU'RE BRAND NEW TO GMING

I'll be frank: if you've never played a roleplaying game before, starting off being the game master is pretty difficult. You're much better off if you can play in a game where someone else is the GM at least a few times, get an idea for how things are supposed to go, and then try your hand at running a game.

Of course, that's not going to be possible for everyone. If you don't know anyone who plays RPGs but really want to give them a try, well, someone's got to be the GM, and it might as well be you. My recommendation, though, would be to watch some games online that have been recorded (they're easy to find—just search for “actual play,” “tabletop RPG streams,” or “tabletop RPG videos”). At least you'll get an idea of what a session looks like, and how the GM/player interaction works.

YOUR ROLE

The players provide the main characters of the story. You provide everything else. If they've got to climb a wall, you tell them how high it is and how difficult it is to climb. If they've got to explore a monster's lair, you determine what's inside, and if the monster is present, you control its actions.

You're the narrator, the bad guys, all the minor characters, and a sort of referee all in one.

An RPG is a game of conversation, back and forth. In broad strokes, it goes something like this:

1. You tell the players what their characters see and hear.
2. One at a time, the players tell you what they want to do in response to what you told them.
3. You determine their chance of success or failure, one at a time, usually expressed as a die roll.
4. The players roll dice and together you determine what happens as a result.
5. Based on what just happened, you tell the players what their characters see and hear (including, perhaps, what actions the NPCs take, which might involve you rolling dice yourself).
6. The players tell you what they want to do.

And so on.

WHAT TO DO FIRST

The players need to make characters. You might have to work with them at least a little, to give them direction. But mostly you need to have the answers to a few questions ready:

1. **Where will things start?** Be ready to set the scene at the beginning of the first session. You are entirely in control over where this is and what's going on. The players will be looking to you for information and guidance.
2. **What will the characters do?** From that initial scene, the players will take action. They'll likely go somewhere else. You need to be ready to describe these new locations. They'll talk to people, explore places, move things, push levers, start fights, run from danger, sneak, surrender, gain treasure, and a million other things. You can't plan for them all, but you

should be ready—in a very general sense—for the kinds of things they might do. If the adventure is about delivering an important message to the governor, you need to be ready with a few options for travel, with obstacles that might get in their way, and with an idea of what the governor will do when they arrive.

3. Who will the characters meet? If the PCs begin the game in the archetypal starting point of a tavern, they're going to talk to the bartender. There will be other people in the tavern. You need to have an idea of what they look like, and what they might know if the PCs ask them questions. If the PCs are going to investigate an old tomb filled with undead, you have to be ready with an idea of what (or who) is in the tomb and how they will react to intruders. And of course, NPCs need stats.

4. What will the characters discover? In every adventure or session, the PCs should discover something. Maybe it's treasure. Maybe it's information. Maybe it's insight into the past. Whatever it is, you'll be the one to provide the details.

HOW TO START A SESSION

Once everyone's sitting down, characters ready, snacks and beverages ready, it's up to you to start the ball rolling. Think of it as telling a story. You provide some details—you don't have to go on and on, and in fact it's better if you don't. But the players need the initial scene set for them, so they have a context in which to take action. Start perhaps in a location where the characters have gathered, preparing for whatever adventure, mission, or task they are about to undertake. A tavern. The entrance to the ruined castle. The briefing room of the spy agency they work for. Something like that.

Maybe start with an evocative piece of art that sets the mood, or play a piece of music (even just a snippet) that gets everyone in the right frame of mind. You could even show a short scene from a movie or TV show that is appropriate.

Once the players start taking actions in the setting you've provided, you're off.



YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PLAYERS

You are the players' guide into the fictional world. You provide the setting, the plots, and all the characters not created by them. You manage and adjudicate the rules and help resolve every action. That's a lot of responsibility, but it's fun too.

Your job as arbiter and referee—as well as the fact that you know a lot of information that the players don't—sometimes gives a skewed perspective of your overall role. You might manage the rules and build the world, but that doesn't put you in a position of authority in other ways. You aren't in charge of the whole experience. You aren't the “god” of the game. It's a group activity. The players aren't there to be entertained solely by you, nor are they there for your amusement. You're all there to have fun. Just because your role is different and has unique (and more) responsibilities doesn't give you any special power over the players or the game.

It's not your job to “punish” the players or their characters when they make mistakes. Oh, to be clear, there should be consequences for actions good and bad, because that's a central conceit of the very idea of story, but you're not some vindictive deity doling out ill fortune or blue bolts from the heavens when a player does something at the table you don't care for. We'll look at the topic more in part 4 of this book, but if there is a problem with a player that's making it hard for others to have as much fun as they should be, it's not your job alone to deal with it, and it's never the right solution to punish a character with a negative in-game event in order to solve an issue with a player.

Many GMs use phrases like “In my game . . .” or “At my table . . .” and you might want to avoid doing that. Because the truth is, it's the group's game and the group's table. Sure, you might have created a cool world or an amazing plot, but it's all for naught if you don't have quality players. It's good to feel strongly connected to your creations, but give the players credit for *their* creations too.



At the same time, while I stress over and over again that the game needs to be fun for everyone at the table, remember that you're counted in that too. You have to enjoy yourself and your time with the players or there's a problem that needs to be fixed.

IMPARTIALITY

It's important that you try to remain as impartial as you can when running the game. Favoring one player over another, intentional or not, is always pretty obvious, even if you think you're hiding it. Giving one player more attention, giving them more generous rules interpretations, giving them more treasure or character abilities—the group will notice you doing this, even if you don't notice it yourself. If you're in a situation where you think you might be tempted to do this (your significant other is one of the players, for example) you need to be extra vigilant to be sure that you don't.

Similarly, don't be adversarial to the players. You want to be impartial when it comes to the NPCs and the story itself. If you treat the game as a contest of the GM versus the players, that (1) detracts from the goal of joint storytelling, and (2) is outright absurd, because at any moment you could have a meteor strike the planet and say "Everyone's dead." That's not fun for anyone, obviously, but it shows how silly an adversarial relationship really is. What you *can* do, however, is have a playful attitude of "I'm making this really challenging for you." This isn't adversarial, just a way to—on a metagame level—inject a bit of tension into the game. When the PCs are victorious, the players will feel even greater satisfaction from believing that you were pushing them to their limits.

YOU'RE NOT THE GROUP'S COUNSELOR

If there's a disagreement between players or a player is causing a problem, it's not your responsibility alone to handle it. You should, when appropriate, be part of the solution, but it's the whole group's duty to make sure that things go smoothly and everyone has a good time.

THE DIFFERENT SKILLS OF A GM

Being a great GM involves being at least pretty good at a variety of things, and they're not necessarily related. What I mean is, it's easy to be good at one while not being good at another. You don't need to be great at all of them to be a great GM (though if greatness is your goal, you should at least not be terrible at any of them).

Although all of these skills will be covered in more detail, let's quickly enumerate the various aspects that a GM needs to focus on.

WORLDBUILDING

To start with, you need a setting. Even before the first player sits down at the table, you've very likely already spent a great deal of time preparing the setting. We call this worldbuilding. It's an activity unto itself. Fantasy and science fiction writers are also worldbuilders, and some people like doing it for fun. For example, the great worldbuilders M.A.R. Barker (*Empire of the Petal Throne*) and Ed Greenwood (*Forgotten Realms*) created their worlds initially for the joy of it. Only later did those worlds become RPG settings. J.R.R. Tolkien, similarly, created Middle-earth and only later wrote *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* set there.

Worldbuilding is fun and rewarding, but it takes a lot of time. You need to make a lot of notes on people, places, and things of your world. You might have to come up with at least the broad strokes of the setting's history. You probably need at least a rough map, and it probably needs to be something that you can show the players for reference (although in an exploratory campaign, often called a hexcrawl—because the map was traditionally drawn on paper with hexes to show distance and scale—the players will make the map as they go). Certainly you have to know the types of people—races, cultures, organizations, and so on—that live there so the players know what kinds of characters to make.

Did I mention that this will probably take some time?

Now, you don't have to be a worldbuilder, or at least a build-a-world-from-scratch worldbuilder—to be a GM. You can use a premade setting already created for you in a game product. Most

games, in fact, have a default setting and assume that you use it. Alternatively, you can use your favorite fictional world from books or movies and set your game there. In both cases, most of the heavy lifting of worldbuilding is done for you. You probably don't need to figure out where the mountains are or name the biggest cities. Still, at some point you're almost certainly going to have to do some minor worldbuilding. You'll need to create a village for your fantasy setting, a planet for your space opera game, or a hidden enclave for your urban horror game. The premade setting will give you context, though, so if you're creating a planet for a Star Wars game, you know it will probably be different than one you create for a Star Trek game.

If worldbuilding isn't your thing, use a world that's already built. There's nothing wrong with that. In some circles, it's seen as a shortcoming for your game if your world isn't 100% original, but that's nonsense. Some people don't have the time or the interest to do that. Or maybe you love a setting that someone else has created. Or maybe the other players just really love a particular setting and you're catering to them.

If your group has multiple GMs, you can also *share* a setting. This opens up interesting possibilities where you might get to play a character in a world for a while, and then later run a campaign set in that world. Maybe one of the other GMs creates the world and you just use it, or maybe you and the other GMs get together and create it jointly, coming up with all the ideas and concepts as a group.

Finally, there are games where the PCs help build the world, either directly at the start of the campaign or as the game goes on, enriching the setting with each choice they make to develop their characters.

For more on worldbuilding, see Chapter 9: Building a World, page 97.

PLOTTING AND STORY PACING

Once you've got a world, you need to have things for the players to do. Plotting in an RPG isn't like plotting a novel—in fact, to do them in the same way is to court disaster. This is because a novelist plots everything out from start to finish, but in an RPG, what the characters do obviously will change the plot of the story you're telling, and you can't know that ahead of time.

No, plotting in an RPG is more like coming up with story ideas that—once the PCs engage with them—become plots. So it's really more like creating potential plots.

But there's even more to it than that because between game sessions, you have to figure out what happens next. You're plotting, but plotting as you go. (Fiction writers call this process “pantsing,” as in “plotting by the seat of your pants.” Fiction writing has almost as much jargon as RPGs.) Let's say you set things up so the sinister prince is secretly helping the cult, and the PCs investigate. In the last session, they exposed the prince's dirty deeds. Now, before the next session, you have to determine what comes next. Does the cult retaliate? Do they go into hiding? Something else?

A lot comes down to story pacing. Perhaps you give the PCs a break for a while to catch their breath before the cult strikes back. Or maybe you have them strike immediately to let the characters (and the players) know how significant their actions against the prince really were.

Perhaps more than any of the other GM skills we'll examine here, plotting and story pacing come best from experience. If you're new to game mastering, keep things straightforward. Antagonists do something bad (or are about to), and the PCs take actions to stop them. The end.

For more on plotting, see page 121.

For more on story pacing, see page 130.

DESCRIPTION AND NPCs

Once you've started your campaign and the first session has begun, you need to get used to describing what the characters see, hear, smell, feel, and even taste. You're their senses. In fact, you're the only conduit through which they get information about the fictional world. If you don't say it, the players don't know about it, and the characters don't experience it. Description is very important. You want to be clear, evocative, and as concise as possible while still accomplishing the first two.

Similarly, you've got to bring NPCs to the table and have the PCs meet them. You need to describe them, of course, but because they're people (or creatures, or whatever), they can present themselves just as surely as a player presents their character.

They speak, they act, and they react. How they do so either will be fun and memorable or it won't. Sometimes, your experience being a player in RPGs will help you create interesting and compelling NPCs.

For more on description, see 169.

For more on NPCs, see 137.

RUNNING THE GAME

Last, but by no means least, as the GM you have to “run” the game. You facilitate PC actions. You introduce events. You have the fictional world react to player actions. You arbitrate rules. You make brand-new rulings when there is no appropriate rule. You try to keep things from getting bogged down or dull. You try to make sure that everyone is engaged and is treated fairly (and hopefully the players help you with this).

Watching someone else run a fun and fast-moving game is a great way to learn these skills. You can do this as a player in a game run by another GM, or you can watch videos of games run by other gamers. (There are literally thousands of these online.) Some of this skill also comes through practice.

The most important thing to remember is that if you're focusing on everyone's fun—including your own—you're probably doing a decent job of running the game. Yet it's one of those things that you'll never stop improving, even if you run games for decades.

For more on running games, see Chapter 11: Running the Game, page 127.



Len Peralta, lenperalta.com

Take the Reins—Be the GM

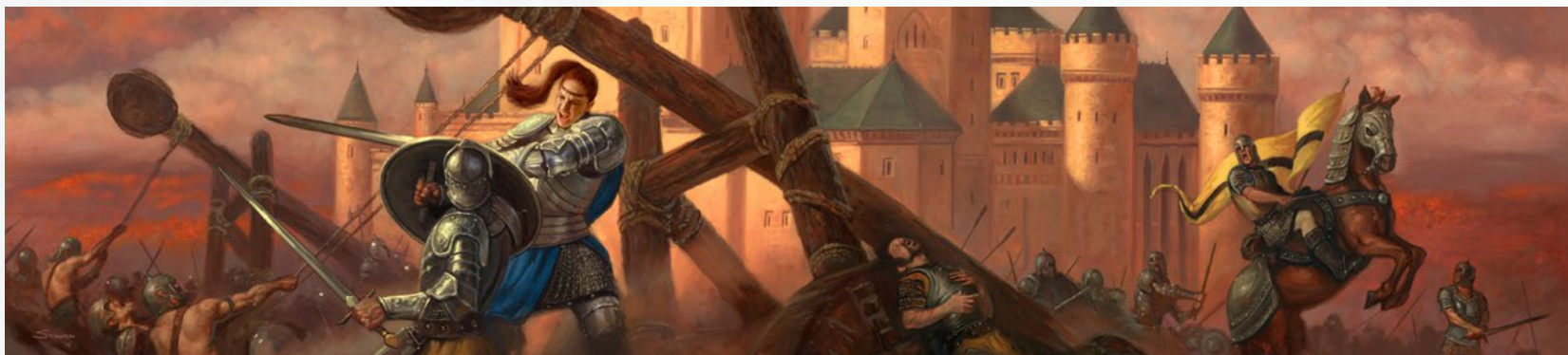
by Tammie Webb Ryan

If you're like me, making the switch from player to game master can seem a bit overwhelming. There is a lot of responsibility on the GM's shoulders. Am I up to the task? What if I mess up the rules? Will I be able to create compelling and interesting conflicts? Am I able to entertain my friends (the players) while having fun? Of course, the answer to all of these questions is yes (even the one about messing up the rules, because no one is perfect). Fortunately, once you're beyond the self-doubting stage, GMing becomes loads of fun.

Getting beyond the self-doubting stage is the key to success for many of us. So, how to do that? For me, primarily, it was talking with my gaming group (my friends/coworkers at Monte Cook Games). I told them I wanted to try my hand at GMing, but I was upfront about my concerns (the ones listed above, plus others). They laughed at me. But, you know, in that loving, supportive way that only true friends can do. (I'm really fortunate to have kind, witty friends with whom to work and game.) They were excited for me to take a turn in the GM's chair. They eagerly shared GMing tips and tricks, and put my fears to rest.

But still, when the big day came, I was quite nervous to run a Numenera adventure for Monte and Shanna (you know, the folks who created the game), because I didn't want to mangle their world and vision. Sensing my hesitation, they quickly reminded me that they made the Ninth World setting for folks to explore, and they were more than happy to explore it with me as their guide. And so, my last piece of advice is to trust your friends. They're at the table to have a good time with you, and they want you to succeed. Trust them and lean on their experience.

GMing is many things at many times. Intimidating. Hard work. A creative outlet. A collaborative process. And highly satisfying. So if you've never been a GM but you're interested, I'm here to encourage you: take the reins and give it a go! You'll be fabulous, and your friends will have your back.



CHAPTER 9: BUILDING A WORLD

Building a whole world sounds daunting. Hopefully, it also sounds fun to you, at least a little bit. It's not as big an undertaking as it seems, mostly because you're not really building a whole world—just what the players experience of it.

Providing a setting for the players is a big part of your role in the game. It's not a prerequisite for playing the game—it is, itself, *part of playing the game*. And it's a part that only you get to do, usually (although there are ways to share the fun, but we'll get to that later). In other words, don't look at worldbuilding as a necessary evil or a hoop you have to jump through to get to the good stuff. This is the good stuff (at least some of it).

BUILD, BUY, OR BORROW A WORLD?

If building a world doesn't interest you or you don't have the time, there are ways around it. Lots of games—most of them, in fact—come with a built-in setting or provide an additional setting product that you can purchase if you choose. The Numenera science-fantasy RPG, for example, comes with a setting already provided called the Ninth World. The rulebook also has a great deal of information about that setting, enough to start playing a game there.

There are pluses and minuses to each approach.

BUILD

The benefit of creating your own world (in addition to the fact that it's a fun, creative outlet) is that you're in complete control. The mountains, the weird bat-winged things, and the floating city are exactly where you want them to be. You can also make changes as you go. If it would be best for the story if the PCs got to that floating city sooner rather than later, poof! It's not 1,000 miles away—it's 50 miles away. (As long as

you don't contradict something you said earlier—or at least, not without a good story reason—you can change anything with a thought and a word.)

The main drawback to creating a world is the time required.

I will add, though, that if you do have the time, there are few things more satisfying than creating a setting, populating it with characters and potential adventures, and then presenting it to your friends to explore and discover and create stories within. If you like to create, there's really nothing better.

BUY

The main benefit of using a setting provided by a game designer is that the work is done for you. And hopefully, it's well done, has interesting things for the PCs to do, and provides you with what you need. You can, of course, modify anything in the published work to suit your needs or sensibilities. It may have been created by someone else initially, but it's yours now.

The main drawback to using a published setting is that instead of creating, you're reading. For some GMs, it's easier to remember details that they created themselves rather than those they read. Plus, if any of the players have read the same material, they might know information that you don't want them to know. The worst-case scenario is that they know the material better than you do, and that's an awkward place to be.

There's also a stigma among some GMs that using a purchased setting or even a purchased adventure is somehow cheating. That GMs who don't create everything themselves are lesser in some way. Ignore people who say this. GMs from the earliest days used published products to help them run better games. It's fun to see what someone else does with a setting, using ideas you might never have thought of.



BORROW

There is a third option. You can borrow a world. Take the setting from your favorite stories—books, movies, television—and set your game there. Use the knowledge of the setting that you have as a fan and turn it into knowledge you can use as a GM. This requires a fair bit of work, but probably less than making a world from scratch. As an added bonus, you get to spend more time in a fictional world that you love.

Another example of this third option is running a game set in history or the modern day. You're effectively borrowing the real world to use as your setting. In many ways, this is the easiest solution of them all. If you're going to play an espionage game set today in New York City, you just need to learn a bit about the kinds of places spies might go in New York and make up some characters and whatnot for the PCs to encounter. You know the rest because it's the world you live in.

BUILDING OR BUYING ADVENTURES

Similarly, you'll want to ask yourself, "Should I make all my own adventures, or should I buy a premade published one?" (Almost every RPG out there has at least one premade adventure for it—and if you look online, you might find some created and shared by other GMs.)

I am an advocate for published adventures, even if you don't want to run them. Why? Because reading a (good) published adventure is the best way to understand and learn how to run a game. Sure, you can read the rulebook to learn how to play, but an adventure created for the game will show you how to think about adventures and stories for it. If you're going to play a dungeon-crawling fantasy game, a published adventure will show you how to set up a dungeon, how to populate it, and so on. When I started playing RPGs, my first game was *Dungeons & Dragons*, and I didn't fully understand all the ins and outs of what was supposed to happen (I was ten years old) even though I had played with someone else running a few sessions for me. It wasn't until I had a published adventure (they were called modules back then) to look at, read, and, frankly, study like a textbook that I truly comprehended

what an adventure was supposed to be. I never did end up running that particular module, but I'm certain that the ones I created myself in those early days probably looked a lot like it. And were certainly better for it.

START SMALL

As I wrote earlier, you don't actually need to build a whole world. You just have to build what the PCs experience. And at first, that's going to be a pretty small area. Or at least, I recommend that you do it that way. You should take some time to think about what you really *need* at the beginning of the game, and then build that. If the PCs are going to start in a small village near a haunted swamp, you don't need all the details of the huge capital city 300 miles away. Even if the PCs will end up traveling there at some point, they won't do it in the first session. They might, however, need to know the city's name and in what direction it lies (although in the first session, maybe they don't even need that).

By starting small, you can focus on the details that will come up. The first session will be far better if the village and swamp are filled with all manner of interesting people, places, and creatures as opposed to having the whole continent planned out. Don't focus on the big picture at the expense of the small, because the depth you give the first few NPCs the characters talk to, the intrigue of the first few plotlines that form, and the fascinating details of the first few locations the PCs visit will set the tone for the rest of the campaign. In that first session, the players will be a lot more interested in what the local shopkeeper has to say than in looking at the world map you've drawn and filled in with mountains and rivers and cities or the twenty-page treatise you've written on the world's history.

Obviously, once the campaign is up and running, you'll do more creating, but only as needed. When the PCs head to a city, work out the details of that city. Unless you're really good at ad-libbing, you'll want to do that ahead of time, and that's the real trick. Because it requires that you know where the PCs are likely to go before they go there.

Anticipating Where the PCs Will Go

A good GM knows where the PCs will go and what they'll do before they do. However, the GM doesn't force them to go anywhere or do anything. How on earth do you accomplish that?

As a GM, you lay all the groundwork. If the PCs are exploring a set of lost caves, and in the deepest cave there is a pool with a nearby tunnel that leads to an underground city, you can place an NPC, an old map, or some other obvious clue that the tunnel exists and there's something cool on the other end. Know where the PCs will go next? That's right: the underground city. Players have their PCs go where things sound most appealing, interesting, or fulfilling of their goals (wealth, power, information, the recovery of the kidnapped duke, or whatever). And you are the one who controls the places and things that fit that description.

Sometimes, you can subtly encourage the PCs to go in a certain direction or do a certain thing (because you've got stuff prepared for that choice). You do this by observing and learning what the players are likely to do. When given the choice between a rough road through the wilderness and a wide, paved road through the countryside, which will they choose? In other words, do they most often take the difficult choice because it's more interesting or the easier choice because it's safe? Once you figure things like that out, you can guide the players and they won't even know you're doing it.

In the end, what's the best trick? Ask the players. Be upfront. "Where do you guys think you'll go next?" is a perfect question to ask at the end of a game session. Most players appreciate how hard GMing is, and they will be eager to help you prepare by telling you what they want to do next.

Still, recognize from the outset that you'll be creating the world as you go. Embrace this idea, because it's not a weakness—it's a strength. Doing it this way helps you avoid creating material that will never get used, and it lets you keep having fun worldbuilding as you go along, rather than doing it all at once, at the beginning.

YOUR MAP

In the previous section, I said that you should start small with worldbuilding, and that includes your map. If you're running a fantasy game, the players probably start in a small town and only know the immediate area, so you can develop just that town and the immediate area around it—presumably the location of where the first and maybe the second adventure will take place. Create the town and the nearby ruined keep to explore, and that's probably enough to last through the first couple of sessions, at least. You can expand later, as needed. Even if you're playing a science fiction game that involves travel to another planet, the PCs will probably start in a spaceport and visit one location on that other planet. You don't need to map out the galaxy or the entirety of all the planets involved.

Obviously, don't make a map at all if you don't need to. If your campaign takes place in modern Chicago, post-apocalyptic New Mexico, Medieval France, or some other location that's already mapped, your work's done for you. (You'll have to make some alterations to the post-apocalyptic one, but at least you've got a start.)

Likewise, if you're running a space opera game, you might not need a map at all. Maybe just a star chart so you know how long it takes to get from one system to another. And then again, maybe not even that—if the spaceships have some kind of ultra space-warp capability, the stars' relative proximity to one another might not matter. You just need some interesting planet names. When the PCs travel to Gamma Thesaa IV, it's very unlikely that they'll need to know how far the mountains are from the ocean.



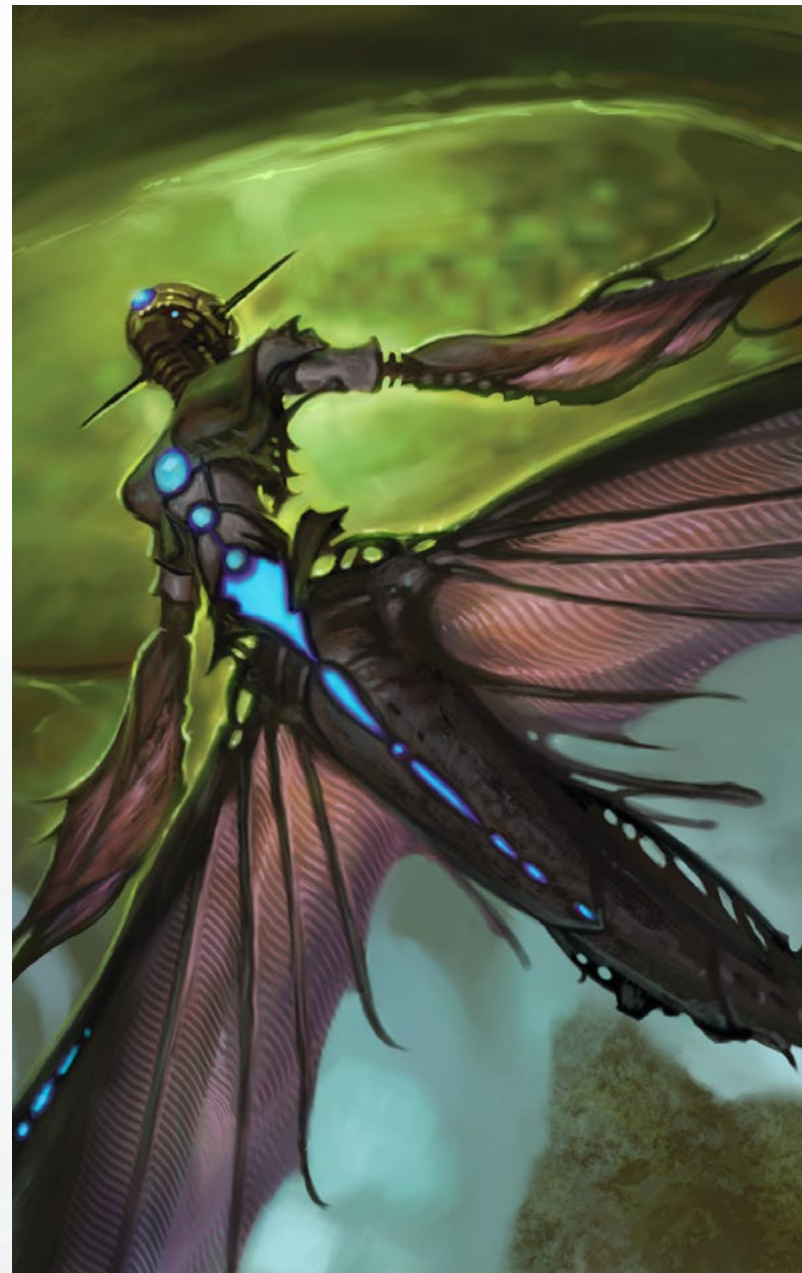
VERISIMILITUDE VERSUS REALISM

Realism should not be your goal. Verisimilitude should be. Your world doesn't have to be realistic, just believable. You don't need to know the average rainfall or barometric pressure of each area on the map, but you shouldn't have rivers flowing away from the sea toward the mountains.

In that light, here are a handful of notes to get you started as you're building a world:

- ☞ Rivers flow downhill, and eventually toward the sea.
- ☞ Rivers join, but they rarely split.
- ☞ Mountain ranges typically parallel coastlines.
- ☞ Mountain ranges and their proximity to the sea greatly affect weather patterns.
- ☞ Regions of planets have different climates based on their proximity to the equator and the poles (and many other factors—the point is, they rarely have the same climate everywhere on the globe).
- ☞ Lots of predators require lots of prey.
- ☞ Different animals and plants live in different regions and climates.
- ☞ Put some farmland around the towns and cities, because all those people need something to eat.
- ☞ People usually build their communities near water when possible.
- ☞ People use what is handiest to build their towns and cities unless travel is cheap and easy.
- ☞ Unless travel is cheap, easy, and safe, most people don't travel very far in their lifetime. A location only 100 miles away might seem distant and exotic.
- ☞ Groups of people instinctively develop a hierarchy. There's always a leader and usually a pecking order.

Any of these things can be changed, of course, but you should do it deliberately. A space opera setting where every planet has one environment (a jungle planet, an ice planet, and so on) is a deliberate genre choice. A river that flows uphill due to magic is an interesting deviation.



HISTORY AND OTHER DETAILS

Like everything else, create only the details you actually need. Otherwise, you'll end up with notebooks filled with all sorts of material that never sees the light of day. (Creating this stuff is fun, though, and sometimes it will turn into material that you can use in the game.)

The thing to keep in mind is that you *want* holes that need to be filled in. Because three months into the campaign you'll get a great idea for a weird new planet in your sci fi game but you've already mapped out all the habitable worlds in the sector, and you won't have anywhere to put it. Remember what I wrote earlier—assume that you'll be creating as you go.

CULTURES

If you're building a brand-new world, once you've got all the landmasses and mountains and rivers placed, it's time to add in the people. And that means cultures. What are the people who live near the sea like? How about over by the mountains? This can be a big task, but there are ways to make it doable.

The easiest thing to do when creating cultures in your fiction is to take real-world material and build on that. Most existing fantasy settings, for example, are just variations on Medieval Europe with magic and dragons, after all. This model is a spectrum that ranges from using real-world culture ("This is Elizabethan England, except there are zombies") all the way to something that is based very loosely on part of an obscure subculture that you are descended from and only know about because your great-grandmother told you about it.

If you use the real world as a model, try to use what you know. If all you know of eastern Asian cultures is something you saw in a samurai movie once, maybe steer clear of using that as a model. If you're from the United States, use the people around you as models instead. Fantasy Illinois or an alien civil war using the American Civil War as a model could both make interesting setting fodder.

Of course, you want to make sure that you're not building a fictional world on a bunch of real-world stereotypes. Doing so can seem lazy at best and offensive at worst.

TECHNOLOGY

You probably need to develop a baseline of the technology level of your game. Sometimes, this is easy. If you're running a historical or modern game, it's self-defining. In fact, there are lots of great tools at your disposal in books or online to tell you exactly when a certain machine or drug or process was invented, so you don't have to guess or rely on the history class you took years earlier. One fun thing you can do in a relatively recent game (anything from the 1800s on) is find a catalog of what people could buy at the time. You can find this easily enough online, and of course if your game is set in the present day, you can just go to Amazon.com. These not only tell you what's available but serve as an equipment price list too.

For games not set in the real world, it helps to use real-world equivalents where possible. When I talk about Numenera's Ninth World setting, I tell people that it has a medieval level of technology because most people get what that means, even though it's not at all a medieval setting. You can do the same, equating your setting to ancient Rome, the 1930s, or whatever.

However, for futuristic settings, you have to come up with general guidelines of what exists and what doesn't. Just think about a typical science fiction setting that you're familiar with—say, Star Trek, for example. Go through the various significant things in that setting and define your setting by comparison. For example, you might make a list:

- ☞ Energy weapons: yes
- ☞ Faster-than-light travel: yes
- ☞ Teleportation: no
- ☞ Instantaneous matter replication: no
- ☞ Independently intelligent computers: yes

And then maybe everything else stems from those decisions. Do they use big lasers to mine valuable minerals? Well, they have energy weapons but they can't create those minerals in a replicator, so, yeah, laser mining sounds likely.

Focus on the things that are really going to shape the whole setting. Faster-than-light travel will utterly change a setting, for example. Minor stuff, like what kind of tools people use to repair their starcraft, is far less significant. As with so many things, if you figure out the broad strokes, you can make up the rest as the campaign progresses.

You can even encourage the players to help. A player might say, "I pull out my communicator—I'm sure we all have communicators, right?" And that sounds reasonable, so you nod and say, "Yeah, who do you call?"

RELIGION

Religion in worldbuilding is like culture. The simplest approach is to use equivalents from the real world. Take Catholicism or Sumerian mythology and change the names. Alternatively, you can take lessons from looking at various religions or mythologies and determine that you need a sky god, a war god, a fertility god, and so on.

If you want to put more work into it, allow your setting and cultures to dictate and shape the religion(s). For example, if you have humans, elves, and lizardpeople, each of those groups will likely have their own religion. If the lizardpeople live in a vast swamp surrounding a weird volcano, perhaps they worship a fiery god that dwells there. The elves, on the other hand, who live in magically floating cloud cities, might revere a number of sky-dwelling gods. And the humans might have a religion with no deities that is based on ancestor worship because they are the shortest-lived of the cultures, and therefore think the most about their lost forebears. In each of these examples, the culture shapes the religion. You could, of course, go the other way, and create a pantheon of deities first, and then create one or more cultures that worship them, shaped by their natures. In other words, you could have a warlike culture worship a

god of war, or you could create a god of war first and then assume that a culture that reveres them would be very warlike.

Either way, you probably need to decide if the gods that are worshipped in your setting are real. The standard in fantasy settings is that the gods are actual beings with incredible magical powers. You can meet them, in many cases. They take a role in important events. In a science fiction setting,





however, it's more likely that any gods referenced by religion are far more removed. The war god of the aggressive aliens you create might suggest all sorts of cultural changes and important religious observances, oaths, and requirements of the warriors, but you probably don't see the god getting involved in current events. Or, if you do, they are just a powerful alien life-form, an artificial intelligence, or something of that nature. In a horror game where evil cultists are trying to summon their monstrous god into our reality, the assumption is that the god really does exist.

Here's what you probably don't want to do, though: if you're using real-world religions, whether it be Christianity, Paganism, or whatever, you probably shouldn't delve into the topic of whether those religious beliefs are real. Only because you risk offending someone involved in the game. At the very least, know the players and know what kinds of subjects they will be sensitive to, and give those areas a wide berth. When in doubt, make the religions in your game world entirely fictional or avoid the topic altogether.

Your fantasy world doesn't need a detailed treatise on religion, a creation story, or anything of the sort unless it's important to the stories you want to tell. You don't have to create all the pantheons of gods worshipped by every culture unless they figure into what's going on in the game. Yes, it's true that religion can offer a setting a lot of flavor—it can affect every aspect of life, from language (through slang, oaths, and so on) to government to the names of the months and days of the week. But if you prefer, you can ignore all that and go a completely different way. It's up to you.

THE SUPERNATURAL

Lots of games have supernatural elements, whether it be magic, psychic powers, aliens, ghosts, or just technology like force fields and teleporters that are impossible as we currently understand physics.

If a setting has supernatural elements, the first question you have to ask is, does everyone know about them? And more to the point, do the PCs start out knowing about them and believing they exist?

In a standard sword and sorcery setting, the answer is yes. While not everyone uses magic, everyone knows that it exists. Someone who says, “I don’t believe in magic” in such a setting just isn’t paying attention. In most non-fantasy settings, though, the answer is often no. Even if there are psychic powers, alien abductors, or monsters steeped in black magic, the majority of the world is ignorant of them. Either approach is fine, but you need to make the choice and communicate it to the players. For example, if you’re running a fairly hard sci fi game, you should know whether it has supernatural elements, and you should clue the players in as well. In a setting that seems grounded in realistic science, having a ghost show up is going to throw them for a loop. (For what it’s worth, that kind of surprise can be fun, but you can probably pull that trick only once, or maybe twice.)

As with technology, you also need to think about two other things: how do the supernatural elements shape the setting (if at all), and what are the limits to supernatural power (if any)? In other words, if spells that can turn stone to powder are common, would anyone bother building a castle? If people can somehow routinely become invisible, how do shopkeepers deal with unseen thieves?

Common supernatural powers are different from technology in that—presumably—supernatural powers exist only in the hands of a select few. Most of the time, just anyone can’t go buy a magic wand and turn into a bird to fly to the next town over. Only a wizard or someone similar could do that. But in a science fiction setting, presumably anyone with the cash could get hold of, say, a jetpack and zip off wherever they wanted. This means that such things will shape the setting in different ways. Remarkable power in the hands of a few is going to enforce elitism or, on the flip side, prejudice and resentment.

As to the limits of the supernatural, you only need to think about this in terms of the average. In a setting where the dystopian government can employ telepaths to interrogate prisoners, you need to know if these same telepaths can also scour the minds of everyone in the city to find a specific person. Perhaps one or two powerful telepaths

PCs and Belief or Disbelief

If the supernatural elements in a setting exist but are largely unknown (or dismissed), and the PCs start out as skeptics or unbelievers, at some point in the game there’s going to be a realization that they’re wrong. They’ll see a ghost, encounter a spell, or fight a monster. In this case, you probably want to talk about it with the players at the time, or ahead of time. Some players will flounder in this situation. They will think that they’re *supposed* to maintain their disbelief and come up with some flimsy justification for how it’s not really a monster, but just old man Jenkins in a mask (or whatever). If that’s how they want to play it, fine, but let them know that they don’t have to do it that way. It’s okay to have a character’s beliefs change, particularly when confronted with indisputable evidence. In fact, it’s potentially a great character moment and a great story moment. It’s an emotional but fun space to portray a character whose very worldview has to change at a moment’s notice, particularly if they’re also in danger from the alien or monster or whatever it is they suddenly must accept.

It’s also okay to allow players to accept it and move on. They don’t have to run around screaming like mad if they don’t want to. People handle things differently, and PCs are no exception. Just make sure that the players know they have free rein and won’t hurt the setting or the campaign by making the “wrong” choice.

could do that, but in this case they don’t matter. You only need to know if that level of power is commonplace or not.

Similarly, in a setting with magic that can bring someone back to life, can it bring *anyone* back to life, no matter how they died or how much time has passed? Without some limits, there needs to be a reason why anyone ever dies—or maybe you create a setting where they don’t. But even if magic like that is extremely rare for some reason, would the monarch in such a setting ever die, or would the loyal and well-paid court wizards just keep bringing them back?

There are no right or wrong worldbuilding answers here. Just questions you want to ask yourself as you're pulling it all together.

LANGUAGES AND NAMES

When you're developing the cultures in your setting, figure out what language(s) they speak. The easiest thing to do is to have everyone speak the same language, or have a "common" or "trade" language so you don't have to deal with translators and difficulty in communication. Since it's a game ultimately about talking, it's frustrating if the PCs often can't talk to the NPCs (and very likely a disaster if the PCs can't talk to each other unless it's an extremely limited circumstance). Still, it feels far more believable if your world is like the real world, filled with a wide variety of languages.

You don't have to know any more about the languages than that. When it comes to describing them being spoken, you might think about whether they sound smooth and elegant, guttural, sibilant, or what have you. But don't worry about that until the PCs encounter someone who uses them.

Related to language, however, one thing you can do to add some zing to your worldbuilding is make your made-up names sound "right."

Obviously, if you need names for a game set in the real world, it's easy. Look up lists of names online. Use the names of the people you knew in grade school. Watch the credits of a movie and jot down the names you see. Names are everywhere.

Nonstandard names like the ones you'd find in a fantasy or science fiction setting are a bit more work. Just jumbling together letters often results in names that sound like, well, jumbled letters. A great way to make names that sound like names but still have a sense of being from elsewhere is to take a regular English name and change one or two letters. For example, Jessica becomes Jevica. Steven becomes Saven. Bruce becomes Brune.

You don't even have to make up words at all. Look at lists of old words that are no longer in common use, like schema, rimose, or taxon,

and make them names for people or places in your setting. You can have the meaning of the word relate to the person or place—or not. It's up to you.

Another way to avoid making up new names is to use evocative English words that aren't necessarily uncommon. Naming a character or a place Throne, Wing, Sky, Tower, Blue, or something of that sort is both evocative and interesting. (This also includes the use of nicknames, like naming a mechanic Wrench.)

And of course with places, you can add evocative words to appropriate suffixes like -hold or -wash to give you names like Spearhold or Greywash. Other prefixes, suffixes, or standalone words you might want to attach to an evocative word to create a name include the following:

Prefixes	Suffixes	Standalone
Barrow-	-fall	Bastion
Black-	-fort	Castle
Blue-	-gate	City
Flame-	-hill	Deep
Great-	-keep	Empire
Green-	-mere	Field
Grey-	-mire	Haven
Grim-	-mist	Hidden
High-	-night	Home
Kings-	-peak	Isle
Lost-	-port	Mount
Queens-	-spire	Rock
Red-	-throne	Sea
Small-	-ton	Sky
Under-	-town	Song
White-	-wall	Station
Wonder-	-wood	Vast

Still, when all is said and done, names aren't just about people and places. They're about culture. The name of someone or someplace should probably suggest who named it. And as previously stated, elves don't use the same language as orcs (or Vulcans), so their names should sound different.

You don't have to be a linguist, however. Use simple tricks. Have one culture use a lot of diphthongs, while another never does. Have one culture use really long names, and another short. For people, one culture uses surnames. Another culture uses a variety of titles (for example, Velator Numare), honorifics (the Honorable Vallis), or descriptors (Horung the Strong). People names and place names from the same culture should, when possible, sound alike, or at least cut from the same cloth.

The goal here is that when a player hears the name Aethryn Eldersoul, they don't have to ask if that NPC is an elf. They know it immediately.

DON'T PANIC

For many game masters, worldbuilding is the most intimidating part of being a GM. Many of those who try it, though, find that it's their favorite part.

Worldbuilding doesn't need to be intimidating.

You don't have to build a world that can compete with Tolkien or Lucas. You just want to create a place that's going to be fun to set adventures in, and fun for the players to explore. It's a backdrop. I promise you, the players won't be expecting greatness. Rather, they'll almost certainly see whatever you create as being great, because it provides them with a setting to have fun with. Creation of this sort is a gift that you give to your players. They will appreciate your hard work and admire what you have accomplished.

The first time when someone talks about a location you created as though it's a real place, or expresses real emotion about an NPC you created—well, you'll remember that moment always.



WORLDBUILDING AS A GROUP

Worldbuilding isn't something you have to do alone. If you want, you can bring the whole game group in on the endeavor. There are many ways to do this.

A JOINT EXERCISE

The first session of the new campaign can be the group getting together and deciding what kind of setting they want to use for stories. As GM, you can show up with literally nothing, relying on the group (including you) to come up with the regions, cities, and cultures of the setting.

Through brainstorming, the group can generate all manner of ideas (probably facilitated by you, since someone needs to keep things moving and make sure all the bases are covered). Through consensus, you can all decide the major aspects of the world—the people, the places, and so on.

When all this is done, the players can then go off and create characters using the information the group developed together. Meanwhile, you can go off and use that same information to start crafting NPCs and story seeds, inserting secrets and so forth as needed.

Joint creation doesn't need to be on this scale, however. In a game I wrote called *Invisible Sun*, every PC is from a huge city called Satyrine, and all the broad-stroke details for the city (and the setting beyond) are provided for the GM. However, in the first session, the players all get together and brainstorm ideas for each PC's individual neighborhood, including their neighbors, nearby points of interest, and local happenings. These ideas then become part of the narrative, as well as hooks for the players to use when playing their characters. If the group decides that an expert in summoning magic lives next door to one PC, that character can use that info to consult with their neighbor on relevant topics later on. This first session in the game gives the players a lot of influence over small-scale, local issues near the PCs, but it's those sorts of things that will likely affect the story being told the most.

PLAYER CHARACTER BACKGROUNDS

Earlier in this book, I wrote about the material in a PC's background contributing to the setting. You can take this a step further if you want. Each player can be tasked with creating a whole city or region where their character is from. Essentially, they have autonomy to create and flesh out their home area. They create the culture, the locations, the religions and customs, and so on. And then they create their character based on the material they've developed, showcasing their interesting ideas. After they're done, it's your job to create the spaces between and make sure that everyone's creations are threaded together into a cohesive whole.

At the very least, the GM should talk to each player about their character's background in terms of how the player wants their PC to interact with the setting. In other words, if a player wants to play a dwarf but not be hated by elves, even though in your setting all elves hate dwarves, you should either try to make them an interesting exception or change that setting detail. Be flexible with the setting. It's everyone's story.

GETTING ONGOING PLAYER INPUT

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed starting small, with the idea that you would build the world only as needed. You'd create new places and people only when they were about to come "onstage." One way to do this is to question the players not only about where they would like to go next and what they want to do, but about what kinds of places they'd like to explore and what kinds of people they'd like to encounter. In this way, you create the world as you go along, but you make sure that everyone gets what they want. One thing is for certain—if you spend time creating a place the players are eager to have their characters explore, you know that it is time well spent and the material you create will get used.

Things I Wish Everyone Remembered About Collaborative Storytelling

by Monica Valentinelli

Over the years, I've played and run a ton of roleplaying games in multiple genres ranging from space opera to horror and everything in between. While the vast majority of my experiences have been positive, I've seen my fair share of blow-ups and arguments. Often, the conflict will include statements like "Well, this adventure can't be sexist, because it takes place in the 1500s and of course women didn't . . ." or "Oh, you're not mature enough, and that's why you don't like rape in an RPG." Or my personal favorite: "If you didn't like this game/adventure/experience, you're not a *real* roleplayer."

Here's a secret: these arguments aren't debates where both sides have equal weight. While roleplaying games are an opportunity to tell a collaborative story, each person at the table has their own thoughts and feelings about the narrative. Many roleplaying games fall apart when one or more people in the group aren't having fun anymore. Most of the time when people aren't having fun with a narrative or game, it's because they feel ignored, shouted down, or criticized by others who *are*. A session's feedback morphs into an attack on players' likes and dislikes and, if left unchecked, can lead to the end of friendships. What could've started out as a powerful conversation quickly spirals out of control, just because a player tried to say why they were unhappy.

The good news? This is fixable. When someone provides negative feedback, the first step is to listen, not tell the player why they're wrong. Keep in mind that their comments aren't necessarily about you; they're often about why they don't feel included in the story. If someone tells me "No, you can't protect yourself, because women wouldn't pick up a sword in that historical era," my response would

be defensive, because I'd interpret that statement as "No, you can't make a roleplaying choice, because I am telling you how to play your character based on their gender." Instead, the GM can ask, "How can I help?" Asking questions is a wonderful way to ensure the player doesn't feel left out!

Let's try another example. If I say I don't want to roleplay rape in an RPG, no further commentary is necessary. That's my personal choice, and that doesn't mean I'm not intelligent/mature/edgy/etc. enough to handle that content in a game. In fact, no one should ever feel obligated to explain why they don't like something; convincing someone to play won't fix the problem. Instead of drilling down into all the reasons why a particular subject/game/system isn't enjoyable, ask the players what types of stories they *do* want to play. Or, if you're hoping to try a game you don't normally play, present it as a fun way to explore something new *together*.

Regardless of game, system, or genre, all players want the same thing: to be part of a memorable story. Players speak up in your group when they're comfortable and they trust their concerns will be addressed; this is a great sign that your gaming group is strong enough to handle criticism. Though negative feedback can be challenging to handle, it is necessary to ensure that people continue to feel safe, secure, and free to participate in a game without fearing an attack just because they didn't like something as much as you did. So the next time you hear a negative comment, reframe that feedback as an opportunity to listen and learn. Whether it's your first session or the last, sometimes applying simple techniques is the best way to ensure you'll have your best game ever!

Build Those Hero Moments

by Bear Weiter

I have a lot of fond memories from my early days of gaming, but one moment in particular still stands out to this day, nearly forty years later.

We were a small group, tracking a band of goblins back to their cave system after an attack on our caravan. Their hideout held a few choice treasures for us to make our own, including a pair of *boots of speed* that I claimed for myself. We encountered a few foes here and there, but nothing we couldn't handle—until we found the large cave where hundreds of them slept. While we tried to sneak through their ranks, ultimately our stealth failed and it was a footrace to the exit. With my shiny new boots I had it made, and I quickly jumped out ahead, but it was clear my companions would not fare well. I did what any good party member would do—I used my advantage to find an ideal spot, turned, and fireballed the mass of monsters into oblivion.

My friends were likely singed through my actions, but they were alive, thanks to me.

None of this was particularly special, and in fact I would argue that my experience was rather pedestrian in the world of fantasy games. And yet it still stands out for me, after all of these years, because it was *my* moment to shine, and shine I did. A great big flaming ball of shine.

I call these “hero moments,” and I believe it's in the interest of the GM to set these up for players. Not only do they build pride in your

players, but when done well—albeit judiciously and infrequently—your players will remember your game long after the campaign is over.

Of course, my example is just one type of hero moment. As a good game master, it's important to know what your players enjoy and put in place the opportunities for them to experience those moments.

For some, fights are not exciting, but a good discussion is just the thing. They might need to convince the king to give up his sword for a worthy quest, or talk the bounty hunter who has been chasing them across the galaxy to work for them instead. These shouldn't be quick interactions but bigger exchanges, fraught with risks of things going badly, and only someone with a silver tongue can turn the tide.

For other players, it could entail landing the perfect healing spell just before the warrior falls, or stealing the spellbook out from beneath the mighty wizard's nose. Or maybe it's a quieter moment, but every bit as memorable, through a love affair that brings a significant change for that group or individual.

Finally, some players find the spotlight uncomfortable, and allowing them opportunities to succeed in their own ways is enough.

None of these suggestions will hold weight if they're too frequent or too easy. Failure should be very real and pose as significant a loss as the gain that comes from success. And of course great failures can be every bit as memorable, and provide a fire for that player to rise up stronger the next time around.

CHAPTER 10: CREATING ADVENTURES

“Adventure” is a catch-all word used to describe what characters do. An adventure might be exploring a ruined castle, delivering medical supplies in a starship, or solving the mystery of who killed Dr. Henderson. I use the word “adventure” here rather than “story” to help reinforce the idea that you don’t really have a story until the players are involved, because you tell the story as a group.

Adventures are different from campaigns because, in theory, each adventure is its own discrete story, while a campaign is many such stories. However, you can also have a campaign that is just one long ongoing adventure. “Adventure” is an intentionally nebulous term in some ways, covering many different things.

Here’s the real truth. In an RPG campaign, it’s tempting to use an analogy like this: the campaign is the novel, and the adventures are the chapters within that novel. That’s convenient and catchy, but in the majority of roleplaying games, it’s just not accurate.

In most campaigns, it’s difficult to tell, exactly, where one adventure starts and another stops. Your group might find out about someone stealing magical potions and start to investigate that, get caught up in helping a farmer against some goblins on the way, find the potion thief but discover that she’s working for an undead sorcerer, attempt to find out more about the sorcerer but get drawn into defending the town against an even larger force of goblins, eventually learn that the sorcerer’s lair is in a distant land across the mountains, but during the trip in the mountains . . . well, you get the idea. Campaigns just kind of go and go under their own steam once they get started. That doesn’t mean that it’s worthless to think in terms of adventures, however. It works to think of them as individual stories when planning them out. But once introduced into the campaign, it’s best to think of them not as discrete, easily separated parts of that campaign, but as interwoven threads in a complex tapestry. We’ll cover this sort of adventure weaving

later. For now, let’s consider the different types of adventures you might want to create and run.

LOCATION-BASED ADVENTURES

Location-based adventures are those in which important events, discoveries, and challenges occur when the PCs move to a new location. When exploring a haunted house, if you go to the drawing room you find a particular clue, and in the master bedroom you find a different one, and if you go to the attic you find a steamer trunk with an ancient idol in it, but if you go down into the basement you find a monster of seething loneliness. Thus, it’s the locations in the adventure that are important.

In this kind of adventure, player choice is usually directional. Do we take the left turn here in the corridor, or do we continue forward and open the door there? In some of these adventures, this might be somewhat random, like wandering through a maze. In others, however, the choices can be meaningful. Information gained in one location might suggest where to go next, or at least inform the PCs what they will find if they do go there. Or there might be overt clues at the decision-making point: if you come to a fork in the path in the woods and there are screams coming from one direction but not the other, well, you’ve got something to base your decision upon.

GM prep for a location-based adventure is usually a map with keyed locations so you know what the PCs will encounter if they go to a particular area. Very often, some of the locations will go unvisited. Given the choice to take the left path over the right, the PCs might never return to go down that right-hand path. This is not a bad thing. It means that the player’s choices are real and have meaning. If you design a location-based adventure where the PCs are more or less forced to go to every location you’ve detailed, you might as well just put them all in a

straight line (which, of course, you can do, but you certainly don't want to do it every time). And if you've prepared a cool encounter that lies down a path the players didn't choose, don't despair—you can probably use at least the essence of that encounter, if not the whole thing, in another location-based adventure later.

EVENT-BASED ADVENTURES

Sometimes, the important triggers in an adventure aren't *where* the PCs go, but instead *what* they do. These adventures can be imagined as a series of if/then statements. For example: *if* the characters agree to help the baron, *then* the marquis sends his assassins to eliminate them. If the PCs steal the ruby necklace, then the alarms sound and the constables come looking for them. If the PCs ask around for more information about the Idea Thief, then her accomplices hear about it and alert her that the characters are onto her.

In the first example, the assassins attack the PCs regardless of where they go. The location isn't what triggers the encounter; the PCs' actions do. It's probably followed by another statement like: if the characters defeat the assassins, then the marquis uses his backup plan and tries to murder the baron and frame the PCs. And that's followed by yet another: if the PCs save the baron, he states his suspicions that the marquis is behind the assassins and the attempt on his life. And so on.

In fact, you can prep for an event-based adventure by drawing not a map, but a flowchart. Each branching path of the flowchart leads to an encounter of significance. This forces you to think through possible choices and actions of the PCs and what the ramifications of those will be. As always, you won't be able to anticipate all the choices they make, but that's okay. You've set things up so that certain events will trigger the encounter. In theory, then, any other action the PCs take won't trigger it. (This might not always work that way, and you'll have to figure out on the fly if an action you never anticipated also triggers the encounter, but that's just an application of logic to the scenario you've created.)

Let's look at our baron and marquis adventure flowchart a little more closely. See the following page.

In theory, after the assassination attempt on the PCs, they might go straight to the queen and try to implicate the marquis without any evidence. You'd then have to decide what happens, but they wouldn't get her gratitude and the reward, as that event is triggered only if they have the evidence.

You can combine the idea of a location-based adventure with an event-based one. That is to say, you have some events triggered if the PCs go to a certain place, and others triggered by actions they might take regardless of their location.

TIME-BASED ADVENTURES

You can also use the passage of time to structure your adventure, but this works best for very specific stories. Imagine that a whole band of outlaws is on their way to raid a little village in the middle of nowhere and only the PCs have a chance of stopping them. You might set up something like this:

Day 1, in the evening: A single outlaw scout sneaks around town. The PCs might spot him and stop him before he reports back to the band.

Day 2, in the morning: A dozen villagers come to the PCs and ask for training so they can help defend their land.

Day 2, in the evening: A small group of outlaws shows up in town to poison the well. If the PCs don't stop them, everyone (including the PCs, probably) will get sick and suffer penalties when the rest of the outlaws arrive.

Day 3, in the late afternoon: The band of outlaws reaches a spot about a full day's travel from the village, in case the PCs want to try to intercept them.

Day 4, at dusk: The outlaws arrive.

FLOW OF AN EVENT-BASED ADVENTURE

The baron invites the PCs to his home and asks them for help recovering his lost signet ring. He suspects it was stolen by thieves on behalf of the sinister marquis, but he won't say that outright for fear of falsely accusing him.

PCs agree to help—The marquis learns of this through his spies and sends assassins to attack the PCs that night, wherever they are.

PCs defeat the assassins—They are free to search for the missing ring. Meanwhile, the marquis sends his last—but most capable—assassin to kill the baron. The assassin has falsified evidence to plant that will implicate the PCs.

PCs stop the assassin in time and save the baron—The baron states his suspicions that the marquis is behind both the assassins and the attempt on his life.

PCs fail at both protecting the baron and preventing the evidence from being planted—The queen issues a warrant for the PCs' arrest. They must now contend with the law and even some bounty hunters.

PCs fail to stop the assassin in time but keep him from planting the evidence—The PCs find orders from the marquis to murder the baron and plant the evidence.

PCs confront the marquis—his bodyguards try to protect him, but if they fail, the marquis surrenders to the PCs. He has the baron's signet ring among his possessions.

PCs go to the queen with the evidence—The PCs gain her gratitude in exposing the marquis. She gives them a large reward.

PCs decline—Adventure over. They hear later that messages sealed with the baron's signet were found implicating him in an assassination plot against the queen. (This is unlikely, as the PCs are friends of the baron.)

PCs fail against the assassins—Adventure over. PCs are dead. (This is unlikely, as the PCs are more powerful than the assassins.)



What we have here are all the events that happen extraneous to the PCs. They can take whatever actions and make whatever preparations they want. More than likely, though, the PCs won't prevent any of the listed events because none of them depend on PC actions (the last one is the exception—if the PCs leave town and successfully intercept the outlaws, they obviously won't arrive).

Not every adventure can use this format, because often the timing of things doesn't matter. And you can combine this type of adventure

with a location-based or event-based adventure by simply inserting a few time-triggered encounters into the mix. For example, if the PCs are exploring a dungeon, in addition to the location-based encounters, you can set up special occurrences that happen after they've been in the dungeon for six hours, or one that happens ten minutes after they make a lot of noise (attracting dungeon denizens).

You can prep for this adventure by creating a timeline like the example above.

Nobody Wants to Die in a Tunnel

by John Rogers

To be fair, maybe your character (whether a player character or an NPC) has a death wish, and seeks only to rid the world of as much evil as possible before meeting their inevitable bad end with a grim smile at unforgiving fate. But if you're part of a ragtag band of adventuring heroes, you're a schmuck if you're out there fighting fire-breathing dragons or fire-breathing demons or frankly fire-breathing *anything* just to make rent. That's what the City Watch sign-up sheet is for, mate. If you're working for the secret apocalypse-fighting government agency, your plans for your retirement days may be ironically optimistic, but you still got 'em. And even if you're in a post-apocalyptic hellscape, well, it was *somebody's* dream not to be a simple War Boy but instead score the sweet gig playing flamethrower guitar while swinging off wires on top of the eighteen-wheeler.

My pitch for making characters easy to play, creating fun relationships with your fellow players, and inspiring offbeat hooks for the GM is this: when in the pub making small talk, what's your character's version of "But what I really want to do is paint"? Note that this is different than a hobby, which is also very cool. No, this is the small, sweet dream they're a little embarrassed to admit at first, but

when they finally open up they won't stop talking about it. This is what they picture themselves doing if not for all the damn cultist-fighting.

Make it impractical. We've heard "I'm fighting to keep my family safe" a million times. But the murder-thief in my current game, who is enrolled in a local dance studio, only to be caught up in its petty politics as he angles for the lead role in the community dance recital, has given the room endless joy (and five NPCs for his GM to use). Be the hitter who cooks, the magician who drags the party to watch her sing at the open-bard night in every new town, the barbarian who sends exotic seeds home for when he retires to the family farm.

Make it small. It's natural to go big with your character's desires, because "big" means "difficult" and "difficult" means *drama*! Even if the dream is big—"reclaim my family manse from the treacherous usurpers"—there are details involved in what comes afterward. Lawyers to contact, money to hustle, workers to hire, art to choose for the library. You're not going to wait until *after* you slay Cousin Roderick to tackle that prep, are you? That would be irresponsible.

Let your big characters having big adventures dream little dreams. They'll thank you for it.

The Time Pressure Adventure

Sometimes it can be interesting and challenging to give an adventure a time limit. This is slightly different from a time-based adventure, because it's really just a deadline. Time doesn't necessarily trigger an encounter—it triggers failure. If the PCs need to find the cure for the plague afflicting a city by the end of the week or everyone will die, that's a time pressure adventure.

Use this technique sparingly. Because consider what a time pressure adventure does. It encourages the PCs to rush, to ignore side plots, to avoid casual encounters in town, to eschew study and training for new skills and abilities, and so on. If they're always under some kind of time pressure, they'll never do any of those things and the campaign will take on a very stressful tone.

DEFINING ADVENTURES BY THE GOAL

Another handy way of thinking about adventures is to look at the PCs' overall goal.

EXPLORATION

Almost certainly the first type of RPG adventure ever created, an exploration adventure is just what it sounds like. The PCs go into an area unknown to them to see what they can find. Usually, there's no goal other than "I hope we find something valuable or interesting." Sometimes, there's a vague goal as an excuse to explore one unknown area as opposed to another, such as the knowledge that the crown of the harrowing lies somewhere within the ruined castle of Abranoc the Seer.

Sometimes, the point of an exploration adventure is to create a map of the area. These adventures usually fall into the category of "hexcrawls," with the players filling in a hex map as they go.

Exploration adventures are great because they are open-ended (the PCs provide their own goal and thus decide when they have achieved

it), can include almost anything you want appropriate to the area in question, and are filled with player choice.

In an exploration adventure, the big mysteries might not be any larger than "what's behind that door?" although they could be far more than that as well. In exploring the haunted asylum, the PCs eventually learn why the ghosts they've been encountering throughout are so angry through a series of intricate clues found in old medical reports, a diary, graffiti on the walls, and talking to a willing spirit. This sort of adventure might involve many encounters, and perhaps even multiple sessions.

One thing that's worth thinking about: when does an exploration adventure end? If the goal is to find a specific thing, the endpoint is obvious. Otherwise, the adventure ends when the players decide they are done. And really, there's nothing wrong with that—the more of that kind of authority you can put in the players' hands, the better.

FIND THE MACGUFFIN

"MacGuffin" is a term that basically means an object (or other element) that provides the motivation in a story, thus driving the plot. So if the PCs are looking for the three Daggers of Power needed to slay the Red-horned Dragon, we can think of the daggers as MacGuffins. (If we're going to be technical, in fiction a MacGuffin is only a MacGuffin if it has no direct use in the story, but let's not argue semantics.) This is a very common adventure setup. Adventures that boil down to "Go find the important thing" are staples in almost any game and any genre. In movies, the Maltese Falcon was a MacGuffin, as is the Holy Grail almost every time it is used, from Excalibur to Monty Python to Indiana Jones.

Often, a "find the MacGuffin" adventure will actually be a series of MacGuffins that all somehow combine or work together, like a magical rod separated into seven parts or three pieces of a key needed to open a special door.

MacGuffins don't have to be objects. One could be a passcode, a spell, the location of a paradise planet, the formula for a poison antidote, or a demon's secret name, to list just a few.



“Find the MacGuffin” adventures are great because they offer a clear and straightforward goal to drive the PCs.

INFILTRATE

The PCs need to get into a place, probably with the intent to do something once there—for example, get into the space station to plant explosives or get into the military complex to find the secret plans.

Infiltration adventures can sometimes be likened to a heist story. They often involve stealth and deception as well as brute force. Of course, attacking a place, like a castle or a fortress, is just another type of (very overt) infiltration.

What distinguishes an infiltration adventure is that the PCs usually have some intel about the place beforehand. If they don't, it's probably an exploration adventure. Intel allows the characters to formulate a plan to accomplish what they need to do. And that's what's great about an infiltration adventure. The PCs go in with knowledge and a plan. The plan might work and it might not, and that helps create tension in the story.

RESCUE

This is similar to a MacGuffin adventure, except the PCs aren't after an object but a person. It's different enough, though, because usually the location of the person to be rescued isn't in question. Instead, the issue is getting them out safely, which sometimes makes a rescue adventure similar to an infiltration adventure or a protect adventure (see 118).

DEFEAT A FOE

Sometimes you just gotta stop the bad guy. They've done something awful or they're about to. The best “defeat a foe” adventures are when the bad guy has done (or will do) something awful that directly affects the PCs. There's a reason that movies sometimes use the tagline “This time it's personal.” It's always better when it's personal. The players are more engaged, the bad guy's taunts and boasts are more meaningful,

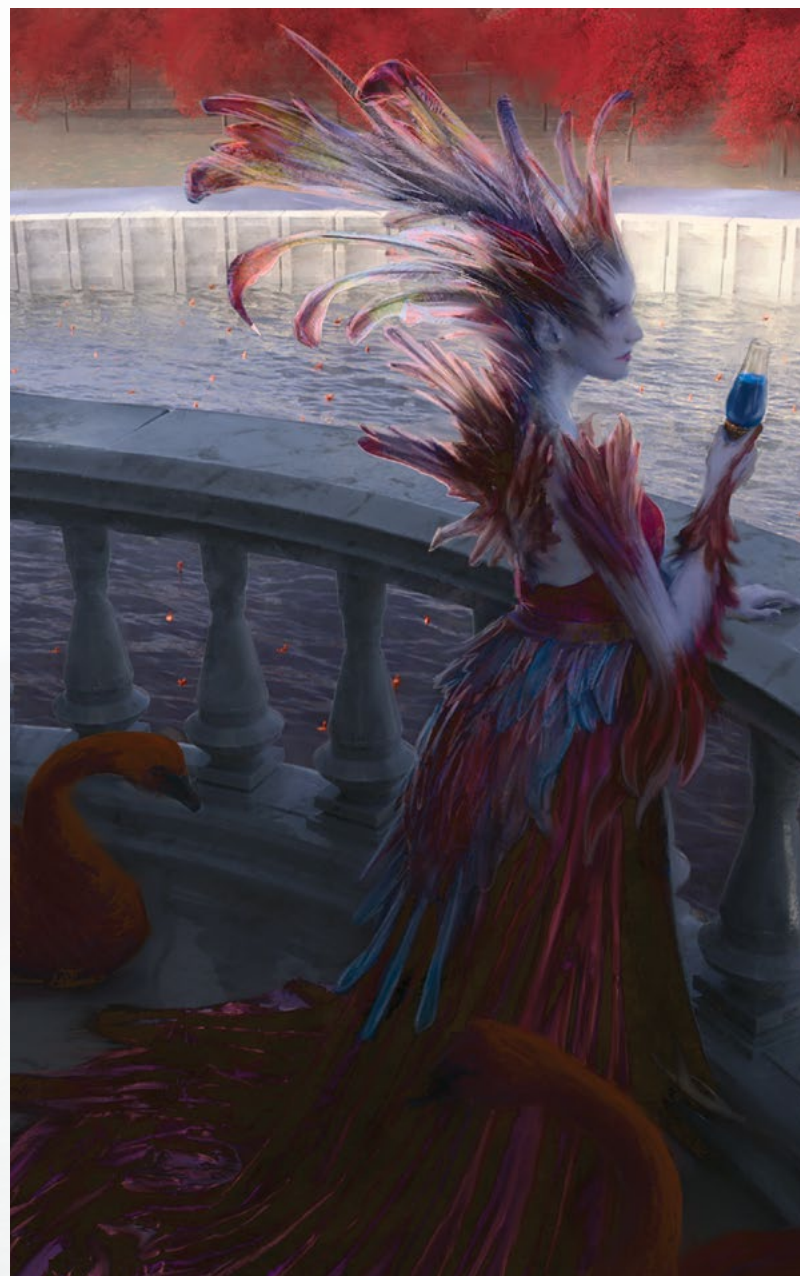
and the victory in the end is more sweet (or the defeat in the end is more infuriating).

Part of defeating the foe might be finding them or getting to them. Tracking the foe's actions, finding their secret lair, or chasing them across the countryside might be part of this adventure. There should almost always be a surprise turn where the villain has one last trick up their sleeve that makes things more difficult for their opponents. This surprise can be an unexpected trap, weapon, or strategy; that they've kidnapped a hostage to get leverage over the PCs; or that they've set up some kind of contingency to get revenge if they are defeated.

DIPLOMACY

Sometimes, the PCs just need to talk to someone, usually to convince them of something, negotiate an agreement, or get some information. As with a “defeat a foe” adventure, the challenge can include finding or getting to the person in the first place.

The danger of a diplomatic adventure is that one character is probably the “star” because they're the one who talks to the NPC. Sometimes that's okay, especially if that character doesn't get to be the star very often (the one character who's good at persuasion and talking in a campaign full of combat, for example). But if you want to avoid this problem, try having multiple NPCs the PCs have to talk to at the same time, or having a group discussion. The latter is a satisfying solution. Depending on how your game system's mechanics work, if there's a way for the whole group to participate in the exchange—with everyone throwing out their own points, their own ideas, and their own reinforcement of the larger issue at hand, and then factoring that into the success or failure overall—make use of that. Conversely, if the group has only one “talker” PC, give the other players something to do too, such as keeping the queen's guards away while the PC talks to her. Either way, this allows everyone to feel like they contributed.



SURVIVAL/ESCAPE

In a survival or escape adventure, the PCs are somewhere they probably don't want to be, and they need to survive and get back home. A format that doesn't get used enough is the "marooned" adventure, where the PCs get stuck on an island, crash on an alien planet, or just get isolated far from civilization and have to find a way to survive. Getting food, shelter, and safety suddenly become all-important, and only after that can they think about eventually finding a way home.

Something that many GMs try to varying degrees of success is to have the PCs thrown in prison or captured by their enemies. Here's a word of warning, though: *players absolutely hate to have their characters get captured*. They hate to have their belongings stripped from them. The heroes being captured and having to escape is a well-worn trope in pulp stories and related fiction, but it's difficult to pull off with regularity in a roleplaying game. Player psychology seems to be that they'd rather see their character die than get captured. If this isn't true of your group, then by all means use the "escape from captivity" adventure and have fun with it. But, if possible, give your players a heads up as to what you're intending or you can unwittingly end up with a TPK (total party kill) as the characters go down fighting rather than allow themselves to be captured.

On a related note, many groups will refuse to flee from danger, even when it's clearly the right option. There's a strong sense of optimism in players, who often assume "we'll get through this" rather than "we're in over our heads and should get out of here." If you're thinking, "I'll have the dragon show up and terrify them, and they'll all run away," don't be surprised if you suddenly have a fight with a dragon on your hands.

PROTECT

A person, place, or thing is in danger, and the PCs need to keep them or it safe. The orc horde is on its way to attack the town, the devil is coming to claim the soul he was promised, or supervillains are planning to steal the ancient staff from the museum. In these scenarios, the PCs often know who is coming, when, and even more details, so they can prepare.

This is a fun way to make players more proactive on a small scale. Rather than reacting to someone else's defenses, they spend a fair amount of game time anticipating the actions of their opponents and setting up defenses of their own.

Other times, however, the PCs don't know who is coming for what they are protecting, or whether anyone is coming at all. This type of scenario is filled with tension, where the PCs might jump at the slightest noise or indication of danger.

Sometimes, the person or thing to be protected is on the move. Spacefaring PCs might be hired to escort a freighter filled with valuable cargo through a dangerous sector of space, for example. Or the PCs might be delivering an object of importance or receiving such a delivery. This can be more challenging, because the characters probably aren't in control of the movement or actions of what they're protecting.

Success or failure in a protection mission can be judged very easily.

The Moving MacGuffin

One of the things that makes MacGuffin adventures troublesome is that if the PCs can't find what they're looking for because they didn't look in the right place, things bog down. A whole session can be taken up with player frustration for simply not finding the right secret door.

The solution for this problem is one that some people will find controversial, but consider not placing the MacGuffin in a specific place. If the PCs go down and explore the bottom of the well, then it's at the bottom of the well. If they think it's in the dungeon below the tower, then it is.

The point here isn't to make things easy for the players. The point is to keep the adventure from becoming a tedious grind just because no one thought to look behind the tapestry. You don't have to put the MacGuffin in the first place the PCs look, but eventually you should put it someplace they *do* look.

THE HOOK

The hook is what gets the PCs to take part in the story. It's what starts the adventure. The cliché hook is that the PCs are in a tavern and a strange figure there (either a mysterious person alone in the corner waiting to be approached, or one who approaches the PCs) pitches the characters a problem and promises a reward. This is such a cliché that even someone who's never played an RPG before will recognize it as such. You can do better.

You know your players. You know what will motivate them. Are they stirred to action by injustice, or do they need a promise of financial reward? Do they seek information? Something else? Whatever it is, that's the hook to use. Ideally, the hook doesn't feel as blatant as a mysterious figure offering a bag of gold to save the world. In other words, it's good if the hook doesn't feel like a hook. You don't want the players to feel like the NPCs have been sitting around waiting for some PCs to come and solve their problem.

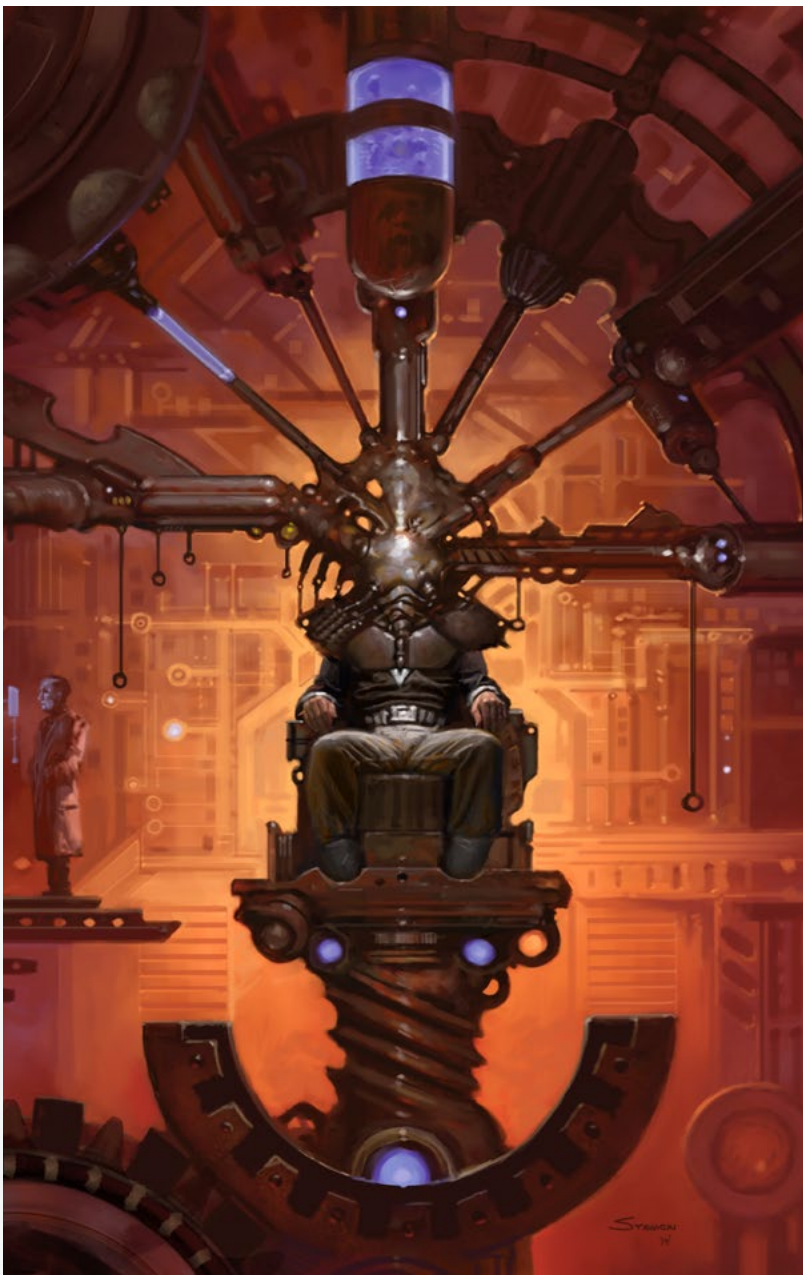
Consider these examples:

- ☞ The PCs encounter an NPC who is going off to do something but clearly is in way over their head. The NPC doesn't ask for help, but the PCs know that if they don't help, the NPC is doomed.
- ☞ The PCs encounter a mystery. For example, the village they come upon is completely empty—where is everyone? Solving that mystery leads the PCs to the adventure.
- ☞ The PCs are doing one thing that leads to something much larger. For example, after defeating a minor villain, the heroes learn that the villain got their powerful weapons from a mysterious stranger, and tracking down this stranger and stopping them is a much more involved adventure.
- ☞ The PCs are in the wrong (right?) place at the wrong time and face some danger, which reveals a much larger threat. For example, the PCs travel to a planet in their ship but find that the world's been destroyed by a horrific weapon, so they get drawn into the efforts to destroy this weapon (sound familiar?).

In most of these cases, the hooks hopefully don't feel like hooks. They feel like part of an ongoing narrative that leads to another, even more interesting part of that same story.

The best hook, of course, is one that the players set themselves. In other words, the PCs are being proactive and sending themselves on the adventure, because the thing that they must do is a thing they *want* to do. This happens when something the PCs love, or the PCs themselves, are threatened. It happens when the PCs learn the location of something they truly want. It happens when the PCs have been wronged and they see a way to get justice or vengeance.





THE ACTS

The traditional three-act structure is so ubiquitous in our culture that a story often doesn't feel like a story without it. Grossly simplified, the structure is this:

Act 1: The problem is introduced.

Act 2: Things get worse.

Act 3: The problem is solved.

Obviously, when we use the term "problem" here, we mean whatever the adventure is about—the thing that drives the PCs to do something.

It's hard to shape an RPG adventure into this structure, but if you can—at least some of the time—you'll benefit because it feels familiar to everyone involved, even if they don't consciously realize it. It can be difficult to do this because you're only one storyteller in a group of storytellers. You can't single-handedly force a structure on the story. At least not every time.

ACT 1

The first act is the hook, which we examined already, but it's also the PCs accepting the hook and taking the first steps to learn more about the problem. This act is likely fairly short, unless the reveal of the problem is very slow.

ACT 2

Typically, Act 2 is the longest of the three, and it's where the characters try to deal with the problem introduced in Act 1 but either fail or simply find that it's not exactly what they thought. Most likely, a new complication arises. This is probably the "meat" of the adventure, where the PCs confront the problem as head-on as they can. If the adventure is about stopping a vampire from preying on the local village, Act 2 might be exploring her castle, confronting her minions, and learning where she hides. Alternatively, Act 2 could be the PCs waiting in the village for the vampire to strike, confronting her, and then after she gets away, traveling to her castle to confront her again.

In an RPG, Act 2 is tricky. What if the PCs confront the vampire in the village but she doesn't get away and they deal with her right then and there? What happens to Act 3? If you were a novelist, you'd have it turn out that the head vampire that controlled her is still at large and must be stopped. Or that some evil force restores the slain vampire. Either of these would be the new complication that arises, and the three-act structure is preserved. And you could do either of those in an RPG and that would be fine. But if you do that kind of thing too much, where you tear victory away from the PCs, the players will start to feel cheated. They're going to feel like their first attempt at things is always doomed to failure. Sometimes, you just have to let the story end at Act 2, and congratulate the players on a job well done.

ACT 3

The third act is the climax. The characters confront the main villain, reach the forbidden planet, or break into the prison where the prince is held captive and enact their plan to get him out. The big finale. The boss monster. The showdown. This is where the success or failure of the characters' actions is resolved, followed by the denouement—the results of their success or failure.

OTHER STRUCTURES

There are other ways to shape a story. For example, there's a five-act structure. Nonlinear structures. You might have noticed that one of the classic forms of the RPG adventure, the dungeon crawl—where the PCs explore a dangerous place—doesn't fit the three-act structure. It has its own structure of rising and falling tension. (I suppose someone could claim that it is made of many smaller three-act structure stories.) That's why my point here isn't to say that you must follow classic story structures. But you probably should be aware of the three-act structure, and use it at least from time to time.

LOTS AND SIDE PLOTS

Although you can keep your campaign streamlined, with just one linear plot going at a time, and all the characters involved and acting in concert, you are likely missing out on one of the best aspects of campaign play, which is the side plots. The main story might be about overthrowing an evil dictator in a near-future dystopia, but the side plots—where one character must confront the techs who gave him cybernetic limbs, another character must deal with her gambling debts, and all the characters must help a neighborhood of poverty-stricken people escape from under the thumb of a wicked crime lord—add flavor to the overall story. They give the characters a chance to grow and change, and they give the game an occasional respite from the involved and many-sessions-long main story.

Side plots are often short, lasting maybe just one session or not even an entire session. Sometimes they extend over many sessions, but just a scene here or there as the events advance slowly. Side plots often focus on one character—perhaps something from their backstory, or something they did in a previous session—but that doesn't mean only one player is involved. You can still have all the characters involved to help their friend with an issue that arises. That's what friends are for, after all, and just as important, the group experience is what RPGs are all about. (See 174 for more about one-player side scenes.)

Side plots frequently have a different tone than the main plot. If the main plot is dark, a side plot might be lighter. Even if it has a similar tone, the specific aspects of the side plot—the problem, the villain, the obstacles, and so on—should be very different from the main plot.

Last, the stakes of a side plot should be smaller. You don't have a side plot about saving the world. A side plot might be about saving a single person or a small group of people.

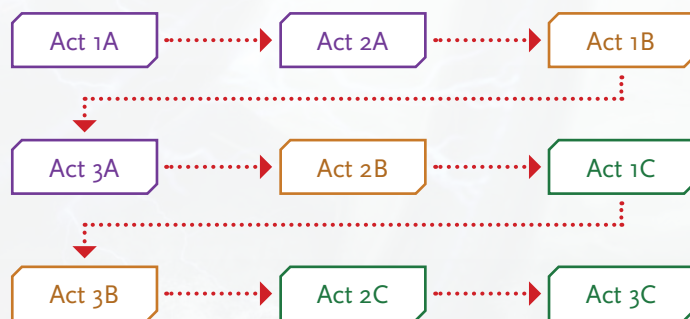
WEAVING ADVENTURES

If a one-shot game is a movie, a campaign is an ongoing television show, or one of those old movie serials with a series of linked adventures that bleed into each other.

Weaving adventures is one of the great parts of campaign play. You can have discrete adventures in your campaign, where the PCs finish up one complete stand-alone story before beginning another. But what's more common, and much more fun, is to weave them together.

What this means is the hook for one adventure doesn't come at the end of the previous adventure—it comes right in the middle, perhaps at a point where the previous story hit a lull or there was a reason for things to pause for a short while. At that point, the PCs start to investigate the new problem (as described in Act 1, earlier) but then are called back to what they were dealing with previously. Then, when they're done with that, they go back to the new adventure, but at some point in the middle of interacting with those issues, a third adventure makes itself known. And so on.

Using the three-act structure model, you might look at it something like this, where A, B, and C are entirely different adventures.

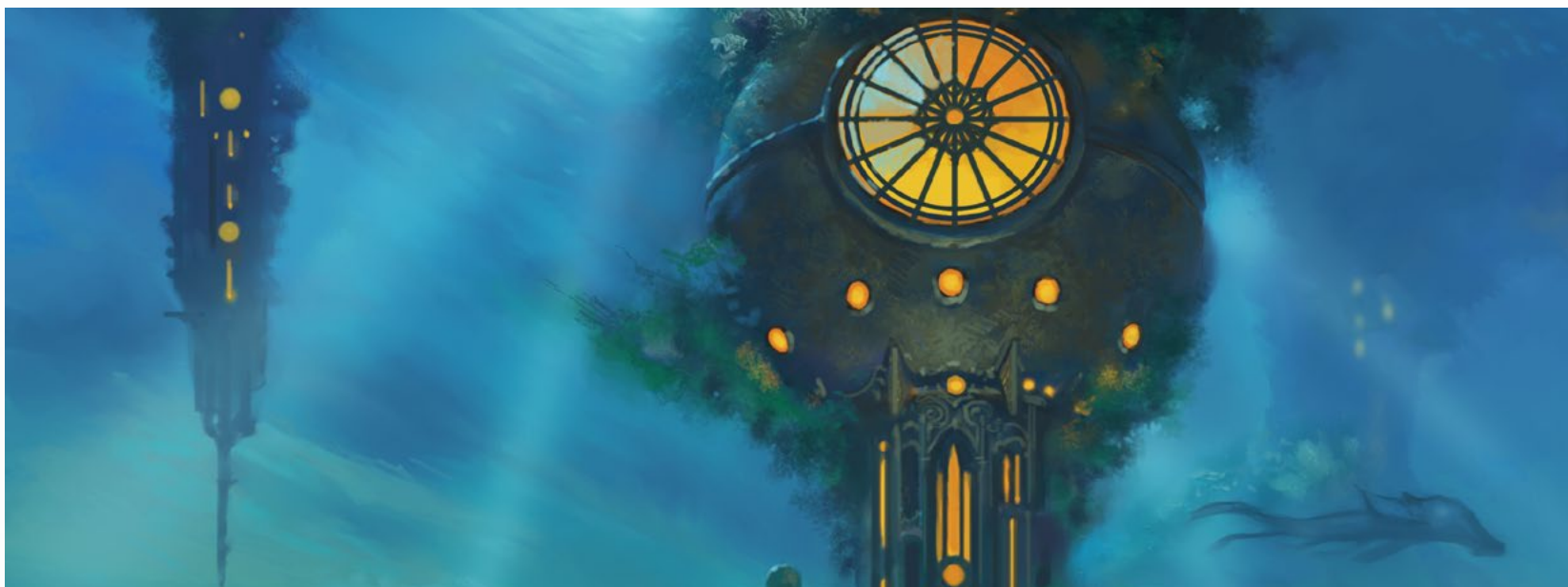


The PCs are dealing with a lot of different things in this kind of model. And if you divide the structure even further (into four or five acts per adventure), you could intertwine them even more. In the middle, they might be dealing with different aspects of all three adventures, for example, even though those adventures might have nothing to do with each other.

There are other ways of weaving adventures, however. You could weave small adventures into the fabric of a larger one. Imagine a standard fantasy game where the PCs are exploring a huge underground dungeon. They come upon a feuding group of goblins and kobolds. At that point, dungeon exploration stops while the PCs deal with this feud, using it to their advantage, negotiating a peace, or whatever it is that they do. Regardless, it's an entire story within the larger story of the dungeon. Then they explore further, coming upon a lone adventurer looking for a lost artifact. They help this adventurer and finish that story, and then go back to exploring. And so on. (This method is a lot like having a main plot with a bunch of side plots, but in this case the adventures being woven are probably larger and more involved than something you'd consider a side plot.)

Another way to weave adventures is to have them constantly refer back to each other. The events of one lead to the events of another, but the solution for the second can only be achieved through some aspect of the first, and so on.

Consider an espionage game where the PCs investigate a secret criminal organization called Shadow. While in a Shadow base, they rescue a captive scientist who tells them that she must get back to her lab and deal with the experiment she was working on. The PCs take her there, only to find that the artificial life-form she was creating escaped in her absence, and they have to help her recover it. They track the life-form to a nuclear power plant in a hostile nation because it is drawn to the energy there. The PCs capture the life-form, but in so doing discover that the staff of the power plant is psychically controlled by what it was really interested in: a powerful alien that has come to Earth. The PCs confront the alien and try to negotiate with it, but the encounter is interrupted



by the secret police of the hostile nation, who want to capture the alien and use its powers. And when dealing with that situation, the PCs learn that the secret police are actually under the thumb of Shadow! The PCs discover that the alien can deal with Shadow once and for all with its psychic powers, but it needs a substance that's in the possession of the scientist who created the life-form. And so on.

Whew! Doing this kind of intricate weaving requires a lot of careful note-taking and planning on your part, but the players may enjoy the twists and turns, and seeing how what they did at the beginning of a campaign comes back to affect what happens later.

ADVENTURE PITFALLS

There are an array of potential pitfalls when you're designing an adventure that will have serious negative impact on the play at the table. Let's examine the major ones so we can avoid them.

RAILROADS

A railroad adventure is one in which the players have no meaningful choices. It's like riding on a train, which can only follow the tracks, and the tracks go in one direction. Railroads can happen when the GM is too heavy handed and dictates player actions. "Your characters all travel to San Diego to attend Comic-Con," the GM says. "We do?" the players reply. The GM obviously has planned things that are supposed to happen in San Diego, and they've just railroaded the PCs there.

Railroads can also happen when PC choices don't matter. For example, the PCs are in the woods. "We go north," they say. "You're blocked by the mountains," the GM replies. "Okay, we head west." The GM shakes their head. "The woods are too thick. It's impassable." And so on, until the players finally choose the one direction the GM wants them to go. The players might as well have said, "We go in the direction you want us to go."

Railroad adventures usually happen when the GM has prepared the entire story ahead of time. If the solution to the problem that the GM has prepared is the only way to deal with it, that's probably a railroad. There's got to be room for player choice, player input, and player creativity.

I will add this one (possibly heretical) thought: sometimes a little railroading is okay. If you railroad the PCs for a short while but the tracks lead to something really fun and interesting, the players will forgive you.

BOTTLENECKS

A bottleneck is a little like a railroad. You put a point in the story where the PCs must do a certain thing or succeed at a certain action or the adventure can't continue. If the information the PCs need to find the hidden vault under the mansion lies in a secret compartment in the study, but the PCs never search the study—or worse, they do search it but fail their rolls—then the adventure is over.

When you create an adventure, make sure there are multiple paths the PCs can take or multiple ways to succeed in the story at every turn. In a perfect world, there will always be room for creative players to come up with a solution that you never even thought of.

With that in mind, then, one way to prevent bottlenecks is to not come up with the solution to a problem ahead of time at all. Instead, allow the players to use their creativity to come up with their own solution. If the PCs are looking for that vault, they can search the mansion for clues, but they can also talk to the butler, they can go to City Hall and look up the mansion's blueprints, or they can just start digging through the floors. As with avoiding railroads, the less you have firmly planned out ahead of time, the more room the players will have for making their own choices and finding their own ways around obstacles.

REPETITION

Repetition is a campaign killer. Fighting the same foes over and over or performing the same missions again and again gets boring. Even if you have a favorite kind of story or a favorite villain, you need to make sure they don't get overused. It's a group storytelling endeavor, and the players might have different kinds of favorite stories.

Repetition can occur on the level of the entire adventure, or it can occur at a smaller level, in the individual encounters you create. If the PCs travel along the coast and see a shipwreck, and the players say, "Well, we steer clear of that because we know it'll be filled with zombie sailors," then you know you've used that particular encounter type far too often.

Repetition, then, isn't just boring—it encourages metagame thinking in players. If they refuse to help a man trapped in the dungeon they're exploring because the last three times they did that, the captive attacked them or turned into a monster or otherwise caused them harm, they're using metagame thinking. They see your predilection toward a particular kind of situation and they're basing their decisions on it.

The problem is, sometimes GMs can't see that they're rehashing things they've already done. This can be a major GM blind spot. For this reason, I often encourage GMs to pick up a published adventure occasionally and insert it into their campaign. It can add a little variety and a much-needed change of pace just by virtue of having been created by someone else.



THE WRONG STAKES

Stakes are what can be lost or gained in a story. They are literally what's at stake. Sometimes, the stakes are too low, and the players won't care. If the hook for an adventure is that a farmer's wheelbarrow was stolen and they want it recovered, the PCs might just buy them a new wheelbarrow and call it done.

Other times, the stakes are too high. As the GM, you want the ability to raise the stakes. Doing so heightens the tension. If the supervillain has kidnapped the president and the PCs need to perform a rescue, those are high stakes, but not too high. If they discover that the villain is forcing the president to hand over the nuclear launch codes, the stakes just got raised. When the stakes are raised, it typically means that what the characters have to do just got more important. It's a fun moment of revelation and intensity. But if the stakes are already too high, you can't raise them further. If the PCs are already working to save the world from a supervillain's plot, there's likely nowhere to go from there. You can't introduce a new complication that the love interest of one of the PCs is being threatened by the villain, because they were already being threatened by the danger to the whole planet.

Plus, it's worth mentioning that if the PCs are always working to save the world, save the universe, or save the multiverse, things can get blasé. It's good to vary the stakes. You can have a save-the-world adventure in your campaign, but you should also have some where the stakes are lower, but more personal. The PCs need to save a small village from a bandit horde, and the villagers have made direct emotional pleas to the characters. Or maybe a PC's best NPC friend is missing and the characters have to find them.



SAMPLE RPG PLOTS

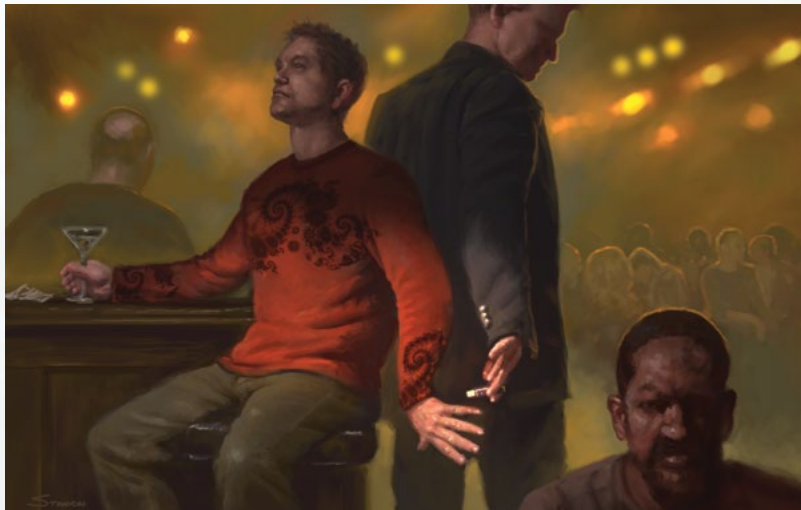
- ☛ The PCs need to ensure that a person or object gets to where it belongs, requiring a journey through dangerous territory.
- ☛ The PCs must recover a long-lost object.
- ☛ The PCs must rescue someone who has been kidnapped, lost, or imprisoned.
- ☛ Someone or something is threatening innocents with their actions and must be stopped.
- ☛ Someone has stolen something important and the PCs must find them, recover what was stolen, and bring the thief to justice.
- ☛ The PCs need to entreat with a new culture with unknown customs, outlook, and perhaps even language.
- ☛ A murderer on the loose must be found and brought to justice.
- ☛ Someone has been murdered and the PCs must solve the mystery.
- ☛ A natural disaster has caused calamity and the PCs must do what they can to help.
- ☛ The PCs must spy or reconnoiter to gain information without being discovered and bring it to those who need it.
- ☛ Two rivals compete to reach the same goal, and the PCs can attempt to help one or the other, but will they choose the right one?
- ☛ To gain the affections of someone, a person is about to undertake a dangerous journey that they probably cannot survive alone.
- ☛ The PCs must explore a mysterious and unknown region and report back on what they find.
- ☛ The PCs must compete in a contest of skill in front of an important audience.
- ☛ The PCs must find a cure for a plague-ridden community.
- ☛ The PCs must find and redeem someone who has turned to crime or other wrongdoing.
- ☛ The PCs are wrongly accused of a crime and must prove their innocence.
- ☛ Crime is on the increase in the community, and the PCs must help the victims and perhaps discover the reason.
- ☛ The PCs are poisoned and must find the antidote in time.
- ☛ The PCs must find a new route between two civilized locations (or a civilized location and an important resource).
- ☛ An important NPC (a leader or other prominent person) is acting erratically and the PCs must learn why.
- ☛ A fire or other disaster occurs and the PCs must rescue others or escape themselves.
- ☛ The PCs need information or advice from someone who lives as a recluse in the wilderness.
- ☛ The PCs must capture some kind of animal or beast so that it can be domesticated and trained.
- ☛ The PCs need shelter from some (probably natural) threat, and the shelter has its own risks.
- ☛ Someone has locked away an important object in a secure place. The PCs must break in and retrieve it.
- ☛ Dangerous people/creatures have invaded an area, and the PCs must try to find out why and negotiate an agreement that will get them to leave (or drive them out).
- ☛ Dangerous people/creatures are coming to invade, and the PCs must hold their position until help arrives.
- ☛ The PCs are put in charge of some operation (defensive, industrial, artistic, or communal) and must make it work.
- ☛ The PCs need to obtain an object or rare substance, but they must get it before rival forces who seek it as well.
- ☛ The PCs are captured, shipwrecked, or mysteriously transported. They must escape and find their way home.
- ☛ Dangerous people/creatures have escaped confinement, and the PCs must cope with the problems that arise and return the escapees.
- ☛ A trusted NPC is up to something insidious and horrible.
- ☛ Someone has committed a crime of passion and is on the run. The PCs must find them and bring them to justice, perhaps with a bit of mercy.

CHAPTER 11: RUNNING THE GAME

Running a game involves being part storyteller, part manager, and part referee. You juggle a lot of information, all the while spending most of your time interacting with the players, describing things, answering questions, clarifying issues, and resolving actions. You are the hub upon which the wheel of the game turns, so you want to make sure that happens as efficiently and easily as possible.

CONVEYING INFORMATION

A roleplaying game is a game about talking, and to tell your joint story, you and the players need to be communicating all the time. Think about how you interact with the players. You are their only source of information about the game and the setting, and they are your only source of information about their characters and what actions they take. The entire game is a continuing back-and-forth conversation between you and them.



ASKING QUESTIONS

You set the scene, ask what the players want to do, and then help resolve that. We'll cover setting the scene and resolving tasks shortly, but for now let's focus on asking what the players want to do. Seems simple, right? It is, but there are still a few things to consider.

GMs should be very aware of when they ask leading questions. Now, my point here isn't to encourage you to avoid them—just to be aware of them. Sometimes, leading questions are valuable tools. But most players will read into a leading question, so don't use them unless you *want* a player to read into them. Think about questions like this:

- ☹ So do you go into the room?
- ☹ Who's in back?
- ☹ Does anyone keep an eye on the prisoner?
- ☹ Which of you looks the most injured?

All of these questions are going to make most players leery. On the other hand, questions like these will make them curious and encourage them to act:

- ☹ Do you look in all the drawers?
- ☹ Does anyone pay attention to what the other bar patrons are talking about?
- ☹ Does anyone activate the device?

But this leading question is probably the most powerful in the arsenal:

- ☹ Are you sure you want to do that?

This is useful when a player—perhaps unthinkingly—states an action that is a really bad idea. “Are you sure you want to do that?” is the GM offering the player a do-over. It's the “undo” function at the table. If you say those words, the players are going to hear, “You shouldn't

do that.” Of course, you can use that to your advantage every once in a while, and use this phrase when the players are absolutely certain they’re about to do the right thing. It adds a tiny bit of extra last-minute tension drawing directly from a player’s own doubt. But don’t do it just to be mean. Do it for that moment of tension. (See page 175 for more on adding tension to the game and why that’s a good thing.)

Overall, though, leading questions aren’t the best way to interact with players. Instead, keep your questions open ended, such as a simple “What do you want to do now?”

You probably also shouldn’t ask multiple-choice questions. “Which way do you want to go?” is okay, but “Do you go east or west?” is not. RPGs are open-ended, and maybe the players want to do something different. Maybe they want to stop and rest. Or dig down. Or fly up. Or teleport home. They may have all sorts of interesting options, and it’s not your job to catalog all of the possible choices, but if you give them only some of their options, they will feel—even subconsciously—like you’re shutting down the options you don’t present. That’s why “What do you do?” is always the best question. It reinforces the “you can do anything” vibe of an RPG, and it puts all the power over and responsibility for the characters’ options in the players’ hands, where it should be.

You’re going to be asking a lot of questions, so cut out any that are extraneous. Don’t waste a lot of time confirming actions. If someone says, “We go back to town,” and none of the other players immediately object, you don’t need to confirm with each of them that it’s something they all want to do. Unless you’re in an action scene or there’s some other good reason to do otherwise, encourage the players to give you big actions, not small ones. In other words, you want them to say “We drive south until we get to the Denver suburbs,” not “We drive south for a while.” The former allows you to say “Fine” or interject if they can’t make it that far because something else happens. The latter forces you to say “Okay, and then what?” over and over until they get to Denver.

If you know the answer to a question, don’t ask it. Just narrate the answer as if you’d asked the question and got the answer you were

expecting. If you know the PCs want to keep exploring the castle, just keep describing it instead of asking the same question over and over. The players will stop you when they have a question or want to take a different action.

ANSWERING QUESTIONS

Players will ask a lot of questions. Questions about the rules, about the setting, about the situation around them. Each time, give them as clear and concise an answer as you can.

Most of the time, you’ll have the answer. Seriously, you will. Players rarely ask questions so far out of left field that you won’t know the answer.

If, however, you don’t know the answer to a question, you’ve got two choices: look it up, or make it up. Sometimes, looking it up isn’t an option. This is when you know there’s no answer anywhere in a book. So you make it up.

If both are viable options, the issues are these:

1. How important is the answer, and how important might it be later?
2. How long will it take you to find the answer if you look it up?

If the answer to number 1 is “not very,” just make something up and move along. These kinds of questions are along the lines of “What color is the wagon?” or “Are the lawyer’s office and the bakery on the same street?” It almost certainly doesn’t matter. But the player doesn’t know that, so they ask. Just give them any answer and move on.

If the answer to number 1 is “might be important” and the answer to number 2 is “a very short time,” look it up. That’s no crime.

If the answer to number 1 is “might be important” and the answer to number 2 is “probably a while,” you’ve got a hard decision to make. You don’t want the game to come to a screeching halt for five minutes while you look up a rule or a bit of setting information. But you don’t want to make up an answer now that’s going to cause problems in the

future. If a player asks, “Does it look like it would be difficult to climb to the roof of this building from the outside?” and you know that the PCs will likely be climbing up to the roof a lot, you don’t want to make up an answer on the spot and later find it contradicted by the climbing rules or the notes you have prepared, because that creates a confusing inconsistency. So maybe you should look it up. There is a third option, though. Make it up, but write down what you make up. Then, when the same issue comes up later, you’ll remember what you came up with on the spot and can ensure that it will remain true going forward no matter what anything else says.

If the answer to number 1 is “definitely important,” look it up.

When describing actions or events, you want to be on top of the conversation. It shouldn’t be triggered by a player question. In other words, you want a player to say, “We walk down the corridor” with you replying, “When you get halfway down its length, an alarm sounds! Suddenly android guards start shuffling out of the now-open door.”

What you don’t want is for a player to say, “We walk 10 feet down the corridor. Does anything happen?” And then repeat that over and over. Stay ahead of the players. Tell them what they experience before they feel like they have to ask.

You also don’t want character actions to become the players asking for permission. You don’t want them to ask, “Can I look in the box?” They don’t need your permission. You want them to say, “I look in the box.” It’s not your job to say what they can do; it’s your job to tell them what happens when they take action.

Finally, sometimes a player will ask a question that they shouldn’t have the answer to. Questions like “Are the police in this town corrupt?” or “Where do criminals fence their stolen goods around here?” Rather than saying, “You don’t know,” try instead asking the player “How will you go about finding the answer to that question?” Doing that turns their question into a forward-moving action. It becomes something to do, and doing things is more interesting than asking the GM questions.

INTERACTING WITH ONE PLAYER VERSUS THE GROUP

When you’re running the game, you’re running it for everyone. You’ve got only so much attention to go around, and you can’t spend much more of it on one player over the rest. If you do, you’ll satisfy one person, but the rest will be frustrated.

However, sometimes one player will attempt to speak for the group, saying something like “We turn on our flashlights and go inside the warehouse.” If that happens, just go with it. If the other players don’t object, it makes things a little easier and moves them along a little faster. You don’t have to get confirmation from all the other players. It’s their duty to pay attention and interject with “Wait, I don’t want to go into the warehouse,” or “I’ll stay outside while everyone else goes in” if that’s how they feel. In this way, you’re like a computer. You can only accept the input you’re given.

SECRET INFORMATION

If you need to convey information to one player but not the others, take that player aside. Step with them out into the hallway or the next room. Not only will you be able to interact with them in privacy, you’ll create a little metagame tension among the other players as they wonder what the two of you are saying. Don’t stay away from the table for too long, though. You’ll lose the rest of the players as they get bored waiting and start up a conversation about something unrelated to the game.

Sometimes a player will need to ask you a question in secret. Rather than taking it outside the game room, they can pass you a note or send you a text. If you can reply with a quick yes or no, great. Don’t take the time to write up a long response, though, because you’ll bring the game to a halt as everyone—not just the player who asked the question—waits for you to finish.

It's Okay to Make Mistakes

by Sean K. Reynolds

As a GM, when running a game, you're going to make mistakes. Mistakes about the rules, mistakes about how character or creature abilities work, or even mistakes about the plot. That's all okay.

You're not a robot and nobody expects you to memorize all the books. Even the people who design the game sometimes forget specific rules (and have to look it up or make a ruling on the fly, which sometimes contradicts the rules). Professional athletes still make bad throws and catches, and sports is their full-time job—you don't need to be a perfectionist when it comes to your hobby.

Sometimes you'll make mistakes that are in the players' favor. Sometimes the mistakes will be in favor of an NPC or a monster. Overall it will balance out. Maybe the goddess of luck smiled upon a PC and they accomplished something they shouldn't have been able to do. Maybe the orc berserker had a blood rune painted on its sword that gave it a bit of an advantage at a crucial moment. Maybe the dungeon wall was more slippery than normal. Maybe the reluctant guard had a moment of empathy for the bedraggled-looking PCs. There are countless small factors affecting every action in the game. The players don't know all of them, so you can handwave these

mistakes as circumstances beyond the awareness of the players or the PCs.

Just remember that the long-term goal is to have fun playing, and the specific outcome of one attack or skill roll, or even an entire encounter, probably isn't going to break things. And if the mistake does have a significant impact on the game—say, if an enemy's too-powerful attack kills a PC, you didn't give the PCs a vital piece of information to move the story forward, or you forgot a monster's immunity to mind control—you have the power to fix it in such a way that allows the story to continue. The PC only appeared dead, but was actually in a coma and is now starting to recover. The PCs find a document with the missing information they needed. The monster was only pretending to be controlled, or its mate or sibling shows up to free or avenge it.

You don't have to tell the players that you made a mistake—you could present a corrective change as a plot twist. But admitting an error lets them know that it's okay for them to make mistakes too, and reminds them that the game isn't the players versus the GM, but the players teamed up with the GM to have fun.

PACING

The key to becoming a great GM, more than anything else, is an understanding of pacing. The players control what the characters do, but overall, you control the speed at which things happen—or at least, your influence is far greater than anyone else's.

The key to pacing is trying to determine what each encounter or scene is about, what each session is about, and what the campaign is about. In a horror game, the campaign might be about stopping a cult from

summoning a terrible entity from beyond. A session of that campaign might be about exploring an ancient temple to get an artifact the cult needs before the bad guys find it. An encounter might be about disturbing a ghost in the temple and its attempts to possess one of the PCs.

This is important information because you can then make decisions comparing what's going on at the table with what the scene, session, and campaign are about. You might make the encounter with the ghost move along quickly, or you might decide that what the ghost has to say

(using the voice of one of the PCs) is important and the visuals of the temple provide a lot of great atmosphere you want to linger on. In the session as a whole, you will want to manage the action so you get to the heart of the temple quickly and the players don't waste a lot of time on the way there. And regarding the whole campaign, you want to pace things so the PCs have time to try to stop the cult and tie up any loose ends or deal with any side plots that arise as the story progresses.

PACING WITHIN AN ENCOUNTER

Pacing means many things. In an encounter or in a scene of the story, pacing is how quickly things move along. Does the big fight with the trolls drag on eternally, or does it move along briskly? Does the conversation with the blacksmith get right to the point, or is there a lot of wheel-spinning? You mostly control this factor, although you need cooperation from the players. One player taking forever to make decisions or resolve actions slows things down for everyone.

Most of the time, you want to keep things moving at a quick pace, simply because you don't want anyone to get bored. Erring on the side of resolving things quickly and moving on to the next scene is a good rule of thumb. Sometimes, though, it's worth taking a bit of time with an important moment. An audience with the queen, the appearance of an elder god, or flying a spaceship into a black hole are all scenes where it might be okay to take your time. In fact, the change of pacing will highlight the importance of the moment and can, all by itself, convey the gravity you want.

But here's the thing about slower pacing—you have to fill up the gaps with *something*. In other words, it's okay to slow things down, but if you do, you need more evocative description, more intriguing NPCs, or more exciting action. You can have a complex encounter where the PCs have to deal with a complicated threat—say, chasing down an invisible thief or coping with super-powered mutants whose abilities keep changing from moment to moment—but you've got to keep things exciting even though resolving the actions takes longer. You can have

a momentous encounter where the PCs meet with a divine entity in its golden palace in the clouds, but you then have to provide more details of what the PCs experience.

You can also flip this around and simply say that important or complex encounters require more time to describe and resolve, but it's okay because they're worth it. Still, you should use them sparingly or they'll lose their specialness and just feel slow.

PACING WITHIN A SESSION

You need to have a clock that you can see while you run a game. It's just that simple. You need to know how much time is left in the session before you introduce a new complication or let the PCs get involved in a complex encounter. You need to know how long that scene in the library just took because the next scene is similar but might take even longer, and you need to make sure you're saving time at the end for when the dimensional shambler attacks. The clock is your best friend. It will help you stay on track, and it will keep you from having to end a session awkwardly or from wasting half the session on something inconsequential because time got away from you.

After running a few sessions with a group, you should start to develop a sense of how much they can get done in a session. If the group can get through three major encounters and a few minor ones, and you know that when the PCs explore the alien's underground base there will be six major encounters, you can expect that exploring the base will take two sessions. With that knowledge, you can plan an exciting cliffhanger for the middle of the mission, which will occur at the end of the first session and lead into the second in a fun way.

Sometimes, you need to make a judgment call on the pacing of a scene in the larger context of the session. The first time the PCs are in an interesting town, you might describe the people and places and play out encounters with the merchants they visit to buy the things they need. Give one of the merchants an interesting voice or quirk and play out the haggling. The next time they go to that town to buy supplies, however,

you might just say, “Okay, you find what you need, subtract the money you spend from what’s on your character sheet” and move on.

So what’s the difference? How do you know whether to play out a whole scene or not?

It depends on the encounter’s importance in the session. If the session is supposed to be about the PCs exploring the wilderness to find the lost city, it’s likely that getting supplies for the journey is important, but not important enough to warrant more than a few minutes of game time at most. Get to the good stuff. Focus on the scenes that will thrill everyone at the table (and that includes you, remember).

If the scene seems like one that a screenwriter would skip over in a movie, it’s very likely a scene to skip over (or finish quickly) in your game. However, if one of the shopkeepers has an old map that would help the PCs on their mission, suddenly it’s a scene that’s worth putting onstage. Because if the map is important, it’s probably important to know where it came from and how the PCs got it. If they have to convince the owner to sell it to them, that will make its use more meaningful.

It also depends on what the players want. If they like to roleplay their characters in a relatively safe and social environment, let them interact with every shopkeeper and put all those exchanges onstage, as it were. The whole session might be a shopping trip, but if everyone’s enjoying it, that’s a good thing, not a bad thing. You can sense this from the players’ reactions if you try to wrap things up quickly and they keep trying to strike up conversations or look for the best survival gear available, sorting through multiple choices. They’re expressing that they want the shopping scene to be bigger.

Last, the pacing also depends on the challenge involved. Climbing up the slope of a mountain can be an exciting scene, filled with important die rolls, teamwork, and tense descriptions of the slippery rocks and the cold winds tearing at the climbers. But if the PCs are all expert climbers or have some other advantage that makes this a very easy task, don’t waste a lot of time on it. Maybe don’t have them make die rolls at all. Just narrate that the climb is arduous and takes a long

time, and get to the next scene where they’re on to something more interesting or challenging.

A GM who is adept at pacing will take this a step further, to the point of perhaps surprising the players, at least at first. If there are a couple of rather low-powered guards at the entrance to a high-tech complex and the players announce their intention to take them out quickly, the GM might just say, “Okay, you knock out the guards. What do you do with their unconscious bodies?” No die rolls, no game mechanics. That will catch the players off guard at first, but it’s going to tell them about the difficulty of the challenge and the importance of the encounter. In an instance like this, the GM knows that PC victory is a foregone conclusion, and rather than taking ten minutes to resolve the rather meaningless encounter, they simply get to the heart of the matter, which is what the PCs do immediately after the fight—do they try to hide their infiltration or charge right in? Because the GM knows that decision will affect the rest of the session far more than how much damage they can inflict on a low-powered foe. Plus, it saves session time for the challenging encounters to come.

If you don’t play with the pacing (and the game mechanics) like that, you can easily fall into the trap of making every encounter a tough challenge. You’re breaking out the combat rules and the initiative rolls anyway—might as well make it worth all that effort, right? Well, no. It’s not very narrative-friendly or believable to say that every encounter is a nail-biter, and it will probably slow the game way down.

The counterpoint, however, is that sometimes you want to keep an encounter a cakewalk but play it out anyway. This makes the players feel smart and competent, and makes their accumulation of new powers, skills, and equipment feel worth it. Particularly if the challenge—like the guards in front of the door—would have been tough earlier in the campaign, and now it’s a pushover. It shows progression and advancement, and that’s a good thing.

Advancing Time

Here's something that many people forget: it is literally just as easy to say "Three weeks later, you are ready to go back into the dungeon" as it is to say, "Okay, so it's the next day, what do you do now?"

In other words, you don't need to narrate or play through every moment of every day. What the PCs do between thrilling adventures might be interesting, but it might also just be resting or studying. These are important, but not interesting enough to warrant more than a single statement at the game table.

Being liberal with advancements in time provides verisimilitude to the game. If the PCs conquer the dark lord's army and recover the vital artifact, and they do it all in five days, that doesn't feel very believable. Characters need downtime, and there's nothing wrong with mandating it and quickly glossing over what happens during that downtime. If the PCs' campaign to overthrow the dark lord takes six months or a year—even if most of that was just you advancing time—it will feel more epic.

PACING ENCOUNTERS AND SESSIONS TOGETHER

One of the reasons that pacing within a session is so important is that you want every session to feel significant. You don't want everyone walking away from the table saying, "Well, we didn't really accomplish much tonight, did we?" That's not satisfying.

So it's your job to move things along. If the PCs are floundering looking for a secret cache in a room where there isn't one, don't let them waste an hour doing so. (Sometimes, players will get an idea stuck in their head and won't let it go. This is called headcanon because they've decided the truth of the fictional world for themselves, rightly or wrongly.) Either bluntly tell them "You search and search and find nothing," or put a secret cache there and come up with something useful or interesting to put inside it. Either solution will put an end to the time-wasting.

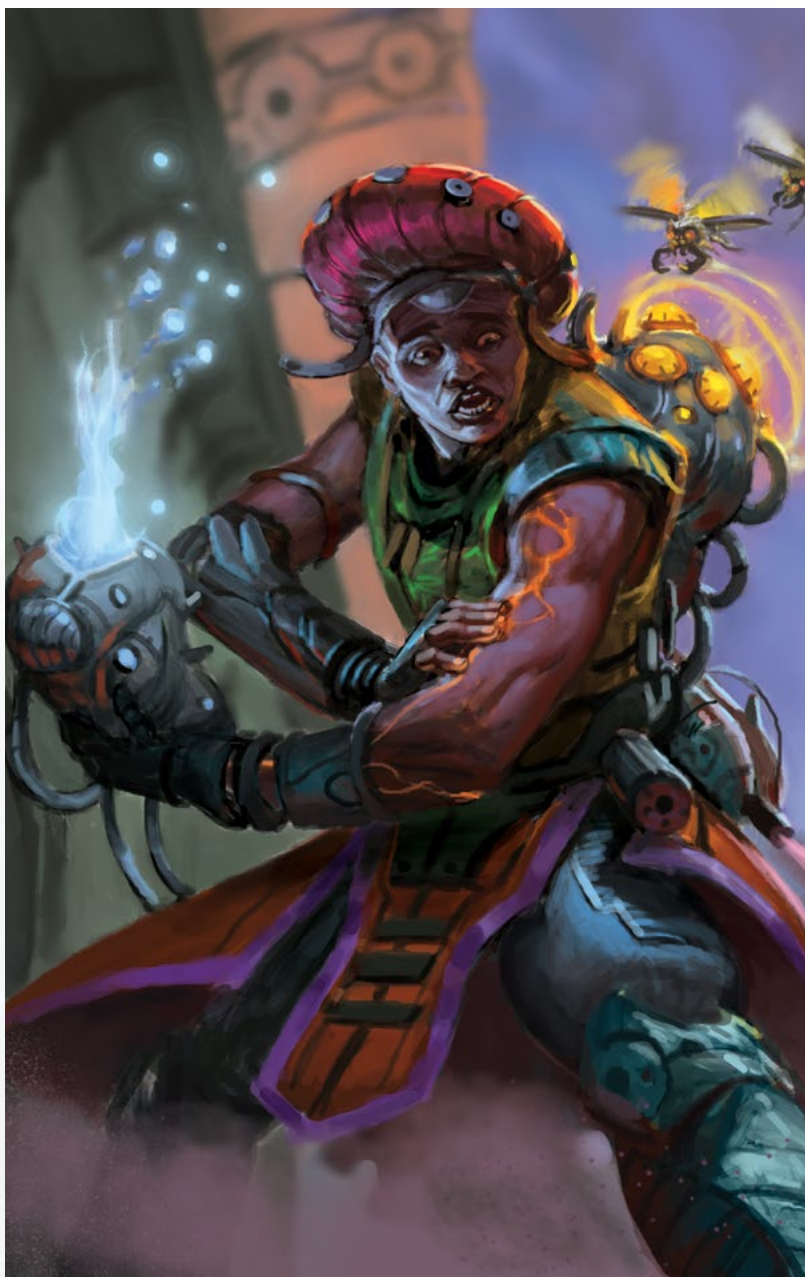
What this means, though, is that pacing within an encounter directly impacts the pacing of the session overall. You want a mix of minor encounters or scenes and a few major encounters or scenes in a session. If the PCs fumble around or drag their feet or suddenly go off in an unexpected and uninteresting direction, you need to keep the scene moving along or cut to the next one so the encounters after it can fit within the time left in the session.

Pacing problems aren't always the players' fault, either. If the goal of the session is to get the needed parts for the ship's hyperdrive so the PCs can deliver a vaccine to a plague-ridden world, don't introduce a pirate ship that attacks them and make them spend most of the session fighting that battle. That might be fun, but you're keeping the story from going where it needs to go.

Likewise, don't introduce a long-winded NPC if the players don't feel like talking and they want to get to an action scene. The pacing should serve the players' needs and wishes as well as yours. Read the room, and if the players are clearly bored with a scene or want to have a different kind of encounter, wrap it up and move along to something they'll enjoy more. Players will appreciate you simply saying that they search the rest of the house and find nothing rather than slogging through all the searching skill checks in each room, ultimately finding nothing.

For a GM, the biggest pitfalls in pacing are introducing too many challenges, which make the matter at hand take far too long, or introducing too few challenges, so things are resolved quickly and you're unexpectedly left with an hour at the end of the session. The solution to too many challenges is being willing to intrude on the action and wrap up a scene that's taking far too long with some other event or just fast-forwarding to the end. The solution to too few challenges is to have a couple of extra encounters—even just light-hearted things that might normally be parts of side plots—ready to fill in any gaps that arise.

Managing the pacing within a session is a skill that you'll develop over time, simply through experience.



BEGINNING AND ENDING A SESSION

Consider beginning each session with a brief recap of what's come before. Alternatively, have a player (one who you know will remember the pertinent details) give the recap while you prepare your notes and get ready to start the first scene of the session. You can also skip all this by emailing the recap to all the players the day before the game session. In any event, a good recap will cover only the highlights and the material the players need to know for the new session.

When you end a session, you have an important choice: cliffhanger ending or no cliffhanger ending? Cliffhanger endings are fun and ensure that the excitement will remain high for the next session. Ending the session just as the PCs find the villain's lair or just as they dock with the alien spacecraft will make the group give a disappointed "Awww," but what they're really saying is they're eager for the next session, which is great.

The advantage of not having a cliffhanger ending is that you have a jumping-off point if a player can't make it to the next session. It's easier to say that a character left to take care of a personal matter if the group is between things rather than right in the thick of them.

A cliffhanger in the middle of an encounter has its own issues. If you start a big involved encounter and you end the session before it wraps up, make sure all the players record their current health, stats, ongoing effects, or anything else of the sort. Encourage them to jot down a note or two about what they were going to do with their next action or any other detail they are likely to forget by the time the next session comes. Meanwhile, you need to do the same thing—probably more so. If you end on a cliffhanger in the middle of an encounter, you need to be able to jump *right* back into the thick of things next time. You don't want the players or you (especially you) to flounder and forget who was where, doing what.

PACING WITHIN A CAMPAIGN

Pacing a campaign is a little like pacing a session. You need to leave time for the things that both you and the players want to do. You don't want to rush the ending or waste a lot of time on things that ultimately aren't important to the story you all want to tell.

One thing you might want to do is create an outline of the campaign. Now, that sounds like I'm encouraging you to plot out every step of the campaign, but I'm not. You want the players to make a lot of real choices and direct the flow of the story. The outline, then, is just for pacing. It's not a map of the story so much as the literal campaign, broken down into sessions. You should update it frequently based on what the players do. This is useful because if you know there are ten more sessions in the campaign and the players' long-term goal will probably take at least that much game time, you know to keep things moving along at a good pace. Conversely, if you think achieving their goal will take only six sessions, you know you've got room to introduce a side plot or two.

ENDING A CAMPAIGN

Many of us forget to plan how the campaign will end. Now, this might not be something you want to do at the beginning, because unless you're railroading the players, there's almost no way to know how things will end. But as you approach the end, maybe a few sessions out, you can start making plans.

Before we get to that, though, how do you know if you're a few sessions out from the end? When does a campaign end?

Well, the group decides, and in that decision, yours is probably the opinion with the greatest weight. A campaign ends when:

- ☹ The storyline or storylines seem like they're going to wrap up naturally.
- ☹ A pre-determined end point is approaching. Sometimes a group will decide at the outset "We're going to play this campaign for six months" or "We're going to play for nine sessions."

If any of these indicators suggests that the campaign will be ending soon, don't keep this a secret from the players. You almost certainly don't want the end to come as a surprise. That's just jarring. In fact, you should talk to the players and ask them which plotlines, character arcs, unresolved issues, or questions they really don't want to leave hanging when the campaign draws to a close. You might not be able to resolve everything, but the answers you get will help you craft a satisfying conclusion to the campaign.

Just like the climax of a movie or book, you probably want the climax of your campaign to come as a big finale. A final confrontation with the main villain, the resolution of a major mystery, the end of a huge endeavor, the culmination of a great journey, or something of that nature.

The ending should be exciting in a way appropriate to the campaign overall. In other words, a combat-heavy game should probably end with an epic battle, a quieter mystery campaign should end with a huge revelation, and so on.

The campaign finale should offer something meaningful for every character. That doesn't necessarily mean something *different* for each character, but it might. What it absolutely does mean is that each player should leave that last session feeling that their character was useful, that most reasonable issues or questions they had were resolved, and that they have an idea of what might be in store for their character after the campaign ends (narratively speaking—retirement, marriage, further adventures, taking on a mantle of leadership, and so on). They're all going to want closure of some kind, and it's your role to provide that, or at least to help them provide it for themselves.

Of course, if you were ever going to have character deaths in your campaign, the big finale would be the time to incorporate them. You might run the kind of game where death is common or always dictated by the dice, and that's fine, but even if you've been narratively sheltering the PCs or running a game without very lethal mechanics, consider removing the safeguards for the finale. And of course, telling the players that you're doing that will heighten the tension and the drama of the final session.

In fact, you might find that one or more of the players *wants* to have their character die, as long as it's a big, meaningful death—probably a heroic sacrifice of some kind. Those events make for great stories, and you should absolutely be open to it. (If possible, perhaps talk to them about it ahead of time.)

If you can, draw the action of the session to a close early enough so that you can spend a decent amount of time—perhaps at least a half hour—on a denouement. Working with the players, talk about what happens in the days, months, or even years following the climax of the story. Talk about changes that would occur to the setting, and the important NPCs, both allies and antagonists. Discuss the implications of the PCs' actions, even if it's just that they all retire wealthy and powerful. Focus on each character individually and work out where they go from there. Answer final questions regarding mysteries that never got resolved (unless doing so would impact the *next* campaign).

And after all of that, save more time at the end for everyone to talk—out of character—about how the campaign went. What were their favorite moments? Who were their favorite NPCs? What did they like and not like about the stories that were jointly told? The ensuing discussion isn't to stroke your ego, but so you can learn from what they say, good and bad—and also so the bonds of friendship forged over the stories you've told together as a group are strengthened. It's fun to tie up everything in a friendly, positive manner.

ENSURING PLAYER AGENCY

Players control their characters. This means that they have real choices to make, and no one else, including you, can make those choices for them. This is referred to as player agency, and it's vitally important. It's why railroading is bad in games, and why it's terrible to have a player constantly trying to impose their ideas on another.

The best way to ensure player agency is to give them enough information that they can make meaningful choices. If a player knows the possible consequences of two different actions, when they choose to take one of those actions and not the other, they've made a meaningful choice. For example, if they come to a fork in the path in the woods, and they can hear the sounds of combat from one branch but not the other, they've got the opportunity to make a meaningful choice. Choosing to get involved in a fight or not, choosing to undertake a mission or not, choosing to keep their word or not—these are important matters and the players should have the control here.

One way that a player can lose agency is when an effect limits their character's actions or eliminates their free will. A character who has fallen down a pit and can't get out loses a great deal of their agency. A character whose mind is controlled by a psychic vampire loses all of their agency. Neither of these situations must be avoided entirely in the game, but you need to pay particular attention when they happen. Some players will really hate it. Some will be fine with it, but even then probably only in small doses.

Similarly, if you put a PC in a situation where their abilities don't work, you're taking away their agency. Putting the superhero in a power-dampening field is an interesting challenge once. Negating the character's powers over and over is just not fun. Players often define their characters by the cool things they can do. Their abilities and skills are what make them special. Negating them is another way of saying "Stop having fun."

Rather than negate their abilities, require them. If a character can phase through walls, don't set up the villain's fortress so that the walls

prevent phasing. Instead, make it so that phasing is literally the only way the PCs can get in. By requiring that ability, you've rewarded the player for selecting it.

NONPLAYER CHARACTERS

Nonplayer characters (NPCs) are your way of inserting yourself into the game world. You might spend a lot of time adjudicating actions or describing scenes, but when you have an NPC come onstage, you get to say things, take actions, and feel like you're playing the game.

It might seem like a funny point to make, but NPCs don't realize they're NPCs. They don't recognize that the PCs are different from them. They don't treat the PCs any different than anyone else. They don't consider themselves to be minor characters, and certainly not expendable ones. They have goals and desires; they want to be happy and safe and successful. They have a unique personality and perspective. They're not there to be helpful or to be obstacles—they're there to get what they want out of life, just like real people.

There are four kinds of NPCs:

Ongoing. This is an NPC that the PCs interact with very regularly. They might even accompany the characters on their adventures. They have a name, a unique personality, and detailed stats.

Recurring. This is an NPC that the PCs interact with regularly. A mentor, a relative, or a similar figure would be a recurring NPC, but so would a foe or villain that the PCs cross multiple times. Like an ongoing NPC, they have a name, a unique personality, and probably detailed stats.

One Time. This is an NPC that the PCs probably meet only once, but the interaction is significant. The NPC has important information to share, has something the PCs need, or wants something from them. One-time NPCs also include adversaries they might face, including nonhuman beings or even beasts that just see the PCs as food. They might have a name (but often don't), they might have some basic details of their personality defined (but often don't), and they probably have stats.

Extras. NPCs who are extras are background characters. People walking by in the street. The vendor selling food in the market. The mechanic in the spaceport. They probably don't have a name, a personality, or even stats. The PCs likely don't talk to them directly, but the GM and players might talk *about* them.

ROLEPLAYING NPCs

The trick with NPCs is that even if they're onstage for only ten minutes, for those ten minutes you should try to roleplay them as if you were a player and that NPC was your PC. A smart character should make smart decisions, and a not-so-smart NPC shouldn't. But every NPC wants to succeed and survive. If the PCs have slain seven of the eight orcs they encounter, is that last orc really going to stand and fight or will they run off? It's up to you to decide, but try to make the decision on the orc's behalf, not on the players' behalf. Doing so will bring a lot of believability to the story.





NPCs that the PCs spend more time with should be even more fleshed out. Having an NPC on an adventure with the PCs is a great way to get the players to interact with them—and with each other—in character. If the group is traveling from one location to another, you can have the NPC strike up a conversation with the PCs about their past deeds, their current goals, their families, or anything else. It's a great way to have calm or poignant moments that aren't about adventure or action, but character.

A powerful tool in your GM's toolbox is making an NPC ally really likable. In a way, players grow accustomed to NPCs being foes and sources of danger or betrayal. Letting them get to know a truly kind, sincere, and friendly NPC becomes great story material, because the players will want to help that character if they're in need. The things that character does and says will have more meaning. And if something bad should befall them, it will be a moment of real drama.

Of course, if we're just talking about an NPC extra here, you don't want to give them nearly this thought. Or any thought at all, really. If the PCs need to buy a backpack, and you say, "Okay, you find a store where you can buy one," there are certainly NPCs involved, even if they're not explicitly mentioned. You might even say, "The salesperson in the store is surprised when you come in covered in blood and grime." But no one really interacts with the NPC as part of the story. So don't give that NPC a moment's thought. Of course, the PCs might try to start up a conversation with them (or with a random person on the street or someone else unexpected), so you have to be prepared to suddenly take on the role of the NPC. They don't need a lot of detail, but it can be fun if the random person the PCs ask for directions or some such has an interesting personality.

Last, while NPCs are the way you get to have a voice in the story, don't ever let an NPC become your mouthpiece. Don't use an NPC to say something you want to say or give clues or insight they could never have just because *you* have them.

BAD GUYS, VILLAINS, AND OPPONENTS

Most games will involve lots of bad guys. It's tempting to make most of them faceless goons who are there to be defeated by the PCs. And sometimes that's okay, particularly in a very casual beer-and-pretzels sort of game. Kill the goblins, take their stuff, and go back to town.

However, you might want to give the villains more thought. You don't have to give every Star Wars stormtrooper their own personality and motivation, but you might at least think about them as people and not robots. They probably have a strong desire to follow orders, but they aren't suicidal. Play them that way. In fact, maybe showcase that kind of dichotomy sometimes. Are they more afraid to run into battle against Luke Skywalker or to face Darth Vader if they don't?

The point is, they don't see themselves as cannon fodder.

Villains—bad guys that you've given a name and a personality—should be roleplayed like fully fleshed-out PCs. They should use every resource and opportunity they have to get what they want, and if they're smart, they should use it wisely. They should have clever contingency plans and a means of escape in case things go wrong.

And it's worth noting that the vast majority of villains don't see themselves as such. They are the heroes of their own stories. They have a reason for doing what they're doing (even if it's selfish or sadistic) that they see as worthwhile. Whatever terrible thing they're doing is worth the goal they have in mind. They might regret the horrible acts they commit, but do them anyway to get what they want.

Still, it's fun sometimes to play up the villainy. A real villain is likely to send minions into danger before endangering themselves (unless they are overconfident about their own prowess), and they almost certainly won't hesitate to sacrifice someone else to save themselves or get what they want. A truly horrible villain is the kind of antagonist that players love to hate, and adding that element to your story ramps up the potential emotion. In the same way that a truly likable NPC can be a potent tool in your toolbox, so can a recurring despicable villain. The villain who crosses swords (maybe literally) with the PCs but always

manages to get away, even when the PCs stop their scheme, encourages the players to emotionally driven actions. When they say through gritted teeth, "We're going to get that guy," you know you've done something right.

However, not all antagonists are villains. You can create an NPC whose goals and desires run counter to those of the PCs, and thus the PCs find them an obstacle or an opponent, but the NPC is not "evil." The chief of police wants law and order in their city, but fears and mistrusts vigilantes like the PC superheroes who take matters into their own hands. The chief is as noble and altruistic as you can imagine, but still an antagonist in the PCs' story.

CREATING NPCs

Take a look at the advice in earlier chapters about players creating characters and consider applying those same ideas to the important NPCs in the campaign. They should have goals, personalities, quirks, flaws, and backstories. They've probably got a place they call home and people in the world that they care about. You want the NPCs to be meaningful additions to the story that the group creates. The important ones should be memorable so the players remember the shopkeeper with the funny accent or the mechanic who always seems to be eating.

One way you can do that is to give each NPC one or two traits that will make them memorable. I've provided a list on the next two pages that you can use as you wish. These traits are in no particular order. They are shorthand descriptions to attach to a minor NPC, so most of them are exaggerated and one-note. As tools to help create an ongoing or recurring character, you'd probably want to develop them further.

SAMPLE NPC TRAITS

- Thinks they're funny
- Legitimately funny
- Always smoking
- Always eating
- A little too fascinated by fire
- More interested in animals than in people
- Always scratching
- Always reading
- Dissatisfied with current situation
- Indefatigable
- Always looking for an easier way
- Conducting illegal activities on the side
- Conspicuously hiding a secret
- Overly generous

- Likes to give people nicknames
- Surprisingly fixated on their hat
- Prejudiced against a group
- Brandishes an overdeveloped vocabulary
- Always forgetting the words for things
- Frequently using malapropisms
- Often hums without realizing it
- Breaks out into song or sings when you expect them to talk
- Overly focused on the reasons behind things
- Prone to make out-of-context comments
- Focused on the appearance of people and things
- Devoutly religious
- Often inappropriately loud
- Inconsiderate
- Swears and curses more than necessary
- Extremely polite
- Belligerent and rude
- Capricious
- Oblivious
- Hard of hearing
- Has a speech impediment
- Has a facial tic
- Extremely soft-spoken
- Dislikes bright light
- Bad body odor
- Always unkempt
- Meticulously groomed
- Smells strongly of cologne
- Very easily distracted

- Scoffs at anything perceived as "fancy"
- Violates personal space
- Easily offended
- Twirls their hair
- Self-deprecating
- Always smiling
- Frequently gets lost
- Sweaty
- Bears an obvious birthmark
- Notable for their high-pitched laugh
- Notable for their deep guffawing laugh
- Always patting people on the back with gusto
- Surprisingly ignorant of very basic things
- Extremely nearsighted
- Talks in a monotone
- Obviously a veteran of a recent war
- Speaks in a surprisingly high-pitched tone
- Speaks with a surprisingly low, gravelly voice
- Inflects statements so they sound like questions
- Fixated on one particular topic
- Secretly, amorously obsessed with someone
- Meticulously tidy
- Pedantic
- Boisterous
- Heterochromatic
- Has no facial hair (including eyebrows)
- Has distinctive facial hair
- Bears a distinctive hairstyle
- Walks with a slight limp
- Jaundiced



Always tired
 Walks with a bounce in their step
 Wears mismatched shoes
 Always fidgeting with something
 Always taking notes
 Jangles when they walk
 Talks to themselves
 Clothes are inexplicably dirty or stained
 Always bearing tools or other useful items
 Jumpy
 Imperturbable
 Sleepy
 Always name-dropping
 Prone to self-aggrandizement
 Very complimentary
 Genuinely interested
 Looking for something they lost
 Always cleaning or straightening
 Careful not to offend
 Gassy
 Easily confused
 Extremely insightful
 Always practicing sleight of hand
 Always attempting to compose a poem or song
 Shuffles when they walk
 Always coughing
 Frequently sneezing
 Indecisive
 Distrustful
 Always chilly
 Overly, effusively emotional
 Obsessed with food and food preparation

Inebriated
 Extremely forward and blunt
 Aloof
 Fascinated with how things are made
 Always complaining
 Stalwart
 Always making wagers
 Speaks very quickly
 Speaks very slowly
 Seems to use very limited vocabulary and syntax
 Lonely
 Doesn't enunciate well
 Argumentative
 Overenunciates
 Overly fixated on odors
 Flirtatious, but harmlessly so
 Moves and walks rigidly
 Mind is always on other things
 Speaks with unique slang
 Overly formal
 Always regaling everyone with stories
 Frequently repeats back what others say to them
 Frequently uses clichéd sayings
 Obsessed with time and punctuality
 Staunch supporter of an organization or public figure
 Hateful detractor of an organization or public figure
 Focused on gossip
 Speaks with an accent no one can quite place
 Always cracking their knuckles (or neck)

Frequently trying to buy or sell nearby objects
 Trying to hide the fact that they are guilty of a crime
 Grieving the loss of a loved one
 In the middle of an argument with their significant other
 Seems to know everyone, and everyone knows them
 Compulsive liar
 Honest to a fault
 Addicted to an illicit substance
 Has a hyperactive sweet tooth
 Always sketching in a sketchbook
 Always makes eye contact
 Has a peculiar handshake
 Easily offended
 Resents advice or suggestions



EVEN A SIMPLE GAME IS FUN

If you're a new game master, you can put together the simplest of adventures and your players will still have a fine time. Maybe even a great time. Sure, an RPG adventure can be imaginative, elaborate, and deep, but it can also be as basic as clearing out a lair of nasty goblins that have been causing the local farmers a lot of trouble. If the game system you've chosen is fun to play, even the simplest plot will provide an entertaining session. It might not be something the players will talk about for years afterward, but that's okay.

And you know, here's the real truth of it: this is the case even if you're not a new GM. Give your sci fi PCs a derelict alien starcraft to explore, with some strange tech to investigate and robots to shoot, and they'll probably go home happy.

Because of the nature of RPGs, with the unpredictable creativity of the players and the randomness of the dice, even a simple goblin lair might allow for a story that will be remembered for years. Maria will always remember that time she pushed the goblin leader off the ledge and she rolled a 20, so the goblin fell into their own huge stew pot. Those things—the events that occur because of ideas generated by the *players* rather than the GM, and events that come about because of the inherent randomness of the game—are far more likely to make or break a session than the ideas the GM provides.

Now, my point here isn't to contend that the GM doesn't matter. As someone who loves running RPGs more than almost any other activity, I'd never say that. What I'm saying is don't put too much pressure on yourself as you're getting ready to run a session, particularly if you're a new GM. I've made this point many times, but I'll make it again: RPGs are about *group* storytelling. It's not all on you. It's on the group as a whole.

With this in mind, then, being open to surprising player actions and ideas is probably a far more important component to a great game session than a fantastic plot worthy of a book or movie. So is being open to letting memorable things occur when the dice suggest it. Sure, you

may have thought that the villain had a perfect escape plan to teleport away when the PCs showed up, but when a PC makes an amazing initiative roll and follows up with an inspired plan to use a magic item they've been saving to keep the villain from casting spells, go with it. Even if you had planned out a whole plotline that will be ruined if the PCs capture the villain now.

When you do this, you step back from the idea of *running* the game and instead become *part* of the game. You expect the players to deal with your surprises (or the surprises the dice bring), and you should be willing to do the same.

Now, it still behooves you to create memorable NPCs and to give the players challenges and choices they've never had before. You still want to do the best job you can with worldbuilding and plotting, and there's lots of advice in this very book that will help you with all of that and much more. But don't let all of this put pressure on you. Remember, even a very simple and straightforward RPG session can be a lot of fun. You're still hanging out with your friends, creating a story together, and that's the most important thing.

When you become open to player creativity and the randomness of the dice, you step back from the idea of *running* the game and instead become *part* of the game. You expect the players to deal with your surprises (or the surprises the dice bring), and you should be willing to do the same.



Aviv Or, www.avivor.com

FINDING INSPIRATION

“Where do you get your ideas?” It’s a question every writer has heard a thousand times, and it’s not always an easy one to answer. For GMs, though, it’s worth examining the places one can find inspiration for characters, places, and adventures—especially since you’ll often have to prepare something in the time between the last session and the next. The good thing is, the answer can be “almost anywhere.”

THE DAILY NEWS

Check out current events in newspapers, magazines, television shows, or online. Anything and everything you see can be used to create something for your adventures or setting. Sometimes, it’s a straight one-to-one conversion. If your game is set in the modern world and you see a news story about a corruption scandal in a huge corporation, you can work that into the story by having the PCs get hired to go undercover in a corporation to discover their nasty secrets. Sometimes,

it takes a little more effort than that. In an occult horror game, you could have the corporation secretly be the front for a black magic cult, and in the boardrooms at night the executives cast spells on the products the company makes. In a fantasy game, you probably don’t have corporations, but you could have the PCs go undercover in the queen’s court to uncover a scandal among the influential people there.

Sadly, the news is always filled with stories of crime, disaster, conflict, and calamity. But they can make for interesting stories in your game.

LIGHTSABERS AND RINGWRAITHS

Since the earliest days of RPGs, GMs liberally looted Conan stories, *The Lord of the Rings*, and the Star Wars universe for ideas. Plenty of games back then (and since) had lightsabers, evil sorcerers named Thoth-Amon, and ringwraiths. Finding inspiration from existing books, movies, or television shows is an obvious avenue, and depending on your players, you can “file off the serial numbers” of the things you borrow, or just

use them as is. In other words, you can have a magic sword with a blade made of light that can cut through anything and call it a starblade, or you can just call it a lightsaber. The former has the advantage of being more original and flavorful, but the latter has the advantage of shorthand. Every player at your table knows what a lightsaber is and what it can do, without you having to describe or explain in detail. You need to be the judge of whether your players will like and appreciate having characters, things, and places in the campaign that were lifted directly from fiction, or whether this will break their immersion and they'll find it unsatisfying or silly.

Not all inspiration needs to be so straightforward, however. Consider, instead, taking elements of many genre stories and combining them to synthesize your own. Take, for example, that well-worn idea of the dark lord. This villain, if used in your campaign, can be part Sauron, part Set, part Voldemort, part Darth Vader, part Lord Foul, part . . . well, the list goes on. If you want to have an adversary like that, it's useful to examine the similarities between these villains. They're all powerful sorcerous beings with legions of monstrous followers, and they all want control—plus, most of them are fueled by vengeance, having been defeated in the past. Create your own villain with these qualities and your players' minds will immediately turn to their predecessors in fiction. And that can be useful in helping them understand and grab hold of both the situation and the challenge.

On the other hand, you can also look at the similarities between Sauron, Voldemort, and the rest and see ways to make your dark lord unique. Instead of one dark lord, have two—twins who work together to reach their awful goals. Or instead of creating a powerful dark wizard, have the villain be a powerful warrior. By looking at the tropes, you can tweak your version to be a bit different.

Similarly, you can review your favorite fiction for the other things your campaign might need: magic items, alien species, horrific elder gods, and so on. Fiction has examples of all of these things and more, and understanding how and why they work will enable you to take inspiration that you can apply to your own setting and stories.

NON-GENRE FICTION

Once you've taken a look at fiction that is of the same genre as your campaign, go further afield. There are fantastic, iconic stories in the world beyond the ones you find in fantasy, science fiction, and superheroes. You can take elements of those stories and insert them into whatever genre you want.

Take the plot of a non-genre story and think about how it could be made into one that's right for your setting. For example, take a look at Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. This play details the story of a power-hungry noble and his even more power-hungry wife, who murder the king to take his place. A tale such as this could fit into any traditional fantasy setting with ease, providing an interesting pair of villains to spin into a web of courtly intrigues and power plays.

But you can go further afield than that. Take a movie like *The Hangover*. This is an over-the-top comedy, obviously, but the premise is one that lends itself entertainingly to an RPG. Three friends wake up with no memory of what happened the previous night due to their excessive partying. Somehow they must piece together the clues at hand to figure out the wild events that transpired so they can find and aid their friend. In your campaign, perhaps the PCs fell victim to an alien's memory-wiping telepathic powers, and now they must learn what happened during the period of time they cannot remember.

Even something like an episode of *Law & Order* could inspire an adventure that revolves around a crime, and the mystery of who perpetrated the crime. The details need to be altered for your setting, most likely (unless you're running a game set in the modern world), but whether your PCs are on a space station, in a medieval castle, or holed up in a post-apocalyptic fortress surrounded by zombie hordes, a murder is still a murder and a mystery is still a mystery. What you learn from the episode is seeing how the show leaves a trail of witnesses and clues for the protagonists to follow. You're borrowing the plot for use in your own setting, and the players provide the main characters.

Almost any story of any time period or genre has an essence that you can use in your game. Once you boil it down to that essence, you can then build your own story on it with whatever elements are appropriate for your campaign.

A word of advice. Stories that involve long stretches of time, whether it be Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* or the romantic comedy *When Harry Met Sally*, are more difficult to use as RPG plots, as most of our games don't lend themselves to time jumps of five, ten, or twenty years.

LIFE ITSELF

If your boss at work dumped a big new assignment on you with a tight deadline, don't (just) grouse about it, use it! Imagine if your PCs suddenly got a new mission they must complete under horrible time pressure from the local magistrate. Now they've got to do what they were already doing, plus this new task. The difference, of course, is that hopefully the PCs' task is entertaining and exciting, even if the thing your boss needs you to do might not be. On the other hand, the magistrate might have the PCs beheaded if they disobey, and your boss—no matter how bad they might seem—isn't that bad.

MID-SESSION

Between sessions, a GM can prepare at their leisure. You can look at books and movies and the internet to get inspired. But sometimes, you need an idea during a session. The PCs have headed off in a direction you weren't expecting, an important NPC antagonist has become their ally, and a bad die roll has just resulted in opening the portal to Hell that wasn't supposed to open until the end of the campaign. What happens next? You weren't ready for any of this. All your notes and planning are no good now. What's a GM to do?

You need something immediate and readily available. What you need—and this is the hallmark of a really great GM—is to be prepared to be unprepared. Here's how you pull that off.



First, recognize that it's going to happen. You can't plan for every contingency and anticipate the PCs' every action. In fact, if you find yourself never being unprepared in a game because your notes anticipate everything that happens, you're likely railroading the players. (See 123 for more on railroading.) You're not giving them enough room to make real choices. Because if they have the ability to make real choices, some of those choices will be unexpected. That's just the way it works.

However, I'm going to go a step further and say that you *want* it to work that way. If you're never surprised as a GM, and you're just relating to the PCs what you've prepared ahead of time, you're not so much a GM as a script reader. There's a reason that you're at the table and the players aren't playing a computer game or reading a choose-your-own-adventure book. And the reason is that those other options give players limited, prescribed choices, but you—as a living, breathing, and thinking human—can handle the unexpected. What's more, handling the unexpected is part of the fun. It's the very thing that makes game mastering exciting and challenging (in a good way).



Second, if the game enters territory you weren't ready to deal with (or had never even imagined you would need to), don't hesitate to call for a break. Let the players use the restroom and grab a snack while you gather your thoughts and come up with an idea. You likely won't need more than five or ten minutes, and frankly, everyone at the table will probably appreciate the break. Depending on how long your sessions are, you might not be able to do this more than once in an evening.

Third, know yourself and the campaign well enough to understand what you need to help you think on your feet (so to speak—you're probably sitting down while you're GMing). Think of it as your GM's secret toolbox.

Let's look at a few things you could have in your toolbox. Remember that the point is to help you come up with ideas you wouldn't have thought of otherwise. All GMs can get into a rut, and that rut is exacerbated when you're forced to come up with an idea on the spot. Your mind invariably turns to a well-worn or well-loved concept, which would be fine except that your games will start to feel a little stale and repetitious after a while. You want new ideas, but they still need to come on the spur of the moment.

Tarot Deck: While we're not interested in divining the future, drawing a random card from a deck with evocative artwork and interesting meanings can be exactly the kind of creative prompt you need in the middle of a session. Draw the Three of Wands, and it might inspire you to have three villains show up to give the PCs trouble, or the PCs might need to find a magic wand (or three such wands!) to solve the problem at hand. If you know the tarot (or have a reference to look it up), you'll know that the card implies plans in motion—maybe everything that's going on in the session is part of an NPC's master plan, even though it all seemed random or unexpected to you at first. If you draw the Lovers card, it might mean that an important NPC is motivated by a love interest, or it might suggest that something happens that involves a PC's love interest.

For what it's worth, a deck of a collectible card game like *Magic: The Gathering* can accomplish the same thing.

Art Book: This idea takes me back. I once ran a short science fiction campaign with an art book as my main reference. It was one of those great books that compiled hundreds of science fiction book covers, and I'd have it in front of me and flip through it while running the game. If I needed to describe an alien or a spaceship, I'd probably be looking at one at the time or I'd have just seen one.

Random Words: The beat writers of the 1950s popularized the Dadaist technique known as the cut-up method of writing, in which you take a newspaper, magazine, or book and literally cut it up so you can randomly rearrange the words to give them new meaning. While you don't have to cut up a book in the middle of your game session, you can still use the idea as a means of providing random inspiration.

Online Art: If you've got your laptop or tablet at the table anyway, have a page of cool art appropriate to your genre open in your browser. This is very similar to the art book idea, but updated for our electronic existence.

Published Adventure: Take a published adventure that you're *not* using. Maybe it's not even for the game you're currently running (but it might be best if it is). When you're stuck, pull an encounter, an NPC, or a whole location out of the product and use it as you need in the game. Sometimes, you can just take the *idea* of an encounter or a small bit of inspiration from it, such as a name, a trap, a creature, or a location description. Even if you never use published adventures, it's not a bad idea to have one or two handy for this purpose.

List of Names: This is something that should be close at hand whenever you run a game. Have a list of names prepared ahead of time so that when you need a name for an NPC, you're ready.

When in Doubt

Novelist Raymond Chandler once gave the following piece of writing advice for when you're stuck in the plot and don't know what should happen next: "When in doubt, have a man come through a door with a gun in his hand." That's not terrible GM advice, either, if you take it more for the essence of the meaning than take it literally. What I mean is, when in doubt, introduce something that is surprising and challenging. Violence is the most straightforward means to accomplish this, obviously, and it works well in many RPGs. If the PCs are exploring a dungeon, have an unexpected monster crash through the door looking for a meal of hapless adventurers. If the PCs are in a scary old house and you're stuck, have the vampire that lives there appear and attack.

But combat is just one option. If the PCs are climbing a mountain, a rockslide is a sudden and exciting danger to face. If they're flying in a plane, the engine gives out. A sudden storm, an earthquake, or weak floorboards finally breaking are all similar applications of this same basic idea.

A word of warning: this kind of sudden, unexpected danger can kill PCs (or the whole party) if you're not careful. You haven't had time to consider all the implications—you just thought of the encounter and introduced it—and by definition the PCs aren't ready for it.

Of course, just as interesting sometimes might be a surprise event that's beneficial for the PCs. A traveling merchant with much-needed supplies, a questing knight looking to join forces, or one of the above dangers affecting the PCs' enemies can all make for an engaging unexpected encounter. Not all surprises need to be bad.



FOCUSING ON THINGS OTHER THAN COMBAT

Many roleplaying games are very combat heavy. And that's fine.

There's a lot of violence in RPGs, but it's not because all RPG players are violent. Combat is just the most straightforward way to match a player-built character with a dynamic challenge, filled with different options, tactics, and surprises. You can build a character who is a great climber, but it's much more difficult to make climbing something as dynamic as a fight.

Sometimes, though, you or your players are going to want to put something in your story other than battles, or after a while you might want to try a campaign where there's little or no combat. Because there are lots of kinds of stories to tell. Conflict is interesting and exciting, but there's plenty to do other than that, and some people don't want to play a game that's just about violence.

Here's a very simple truth: the players will ultimately do whatever they get rewarded for. If the game system rewards them for fighting (through treasure and/or points to advance their character), they're going to fight things. If killing the people in the way is the easiest and most straightforward method to get what they want, they're probably going to do that.

So if you want less combat, flip the script. Award the characters experience points or loot for doing other things. Make combat the most difficult option rather than the easiest one. Or do both—give rewards for overcoming a challenge no matter how it's accomplished.

You can also find game systems where combat isn't the most interesting thing players can do, or games where combat is so deadly that it's probably not a good option for players who don't want to lose their characters.

DISCOVERY

In a game based on discovery, you don't go into the dungeon to fight monsters—you go to discover what's down there. The monsters are just in your way. The draw of “What's behind that door?” or “What does this lever do if I pull it?” are primal aspects of curiosity and wonder. Exploration is fun. It's enjoyable to learn and see new things, and it's certainly not without its own risks and dangers (which is, of course, part of the thrill of combat).

You can make discovery scenes full of surprises (traps, natural dangers) and dynamic situations (navigating the rapids on a raft, crossing a collapsing bridge, and so on).

MYSTERY

Investigating mysteries is similar to exploring to discover, in that you're attempting to learn something. But it's different too. Mysteries often require even more thought—there are weird symbols carved in the doorway to interpret and puzzles to solve. Or they require more interaction with people—dishonest informants and suspects with possible motives and alibis.

HORROR

If the monsters are too powerful to fight, combat's not an option, and the PCs have to solve the problem in different ways. And one of those ways might be to run screaming. Horror scenarios where victory doesn't come through violence are prevalent, and they're interesting because the threat of violence *against* the characters is still there. In other words, the horrible tentacled thing wants to grab you and eat your eyeballs, but you don't stop it by fighting it. You find another way.

ACTION

Car chases, burning buildings, cave-ins, sporting competitions, harrowing escapes—these are all staples of the action genre, and none of them are about fighting someone. These kinds of games can be

challenging to run because they're just as open-ended as combat but often not as detailed and well-documented in the rules of most game systems. However, you can find a way to turn any crazy action the players want to take—leaping from one rooftop to the next, trying to break down a door, fighting a fire, dodging a rolling boulder, and so on—into a skill check or whatever mechanic your game uses.

INTERACTION

Interaction with NPCs (and the other players) is a pretty fundamental part of any RPG, and a tense negotiation, a challenging game of poker, or a heated argument can be as exciting as a combat scene. Most systems have rules for influencing, persuading, or lying believably, and you can enhance those to make these scenes even more involved. Just as combat isn't usually resolved with a single die roll, you can make an interaction require a number of rolls, the success or failure of each dictating what happens next.

Maybe the PCs first need to get the NPC to be willing to talk to them. If they succeed at that, then they need to open the negotiation. Success there might require a slight deception regarding what the PCs have to offer. A failure there might result in the NPC becoming angry, and the PCs then must smooth things over and get the talks back on track. Later, in the middle of the conversation, the NPC makes a surprising demand, request, or revelation. And so on. You can make an important interaction as dynamic as any combat.



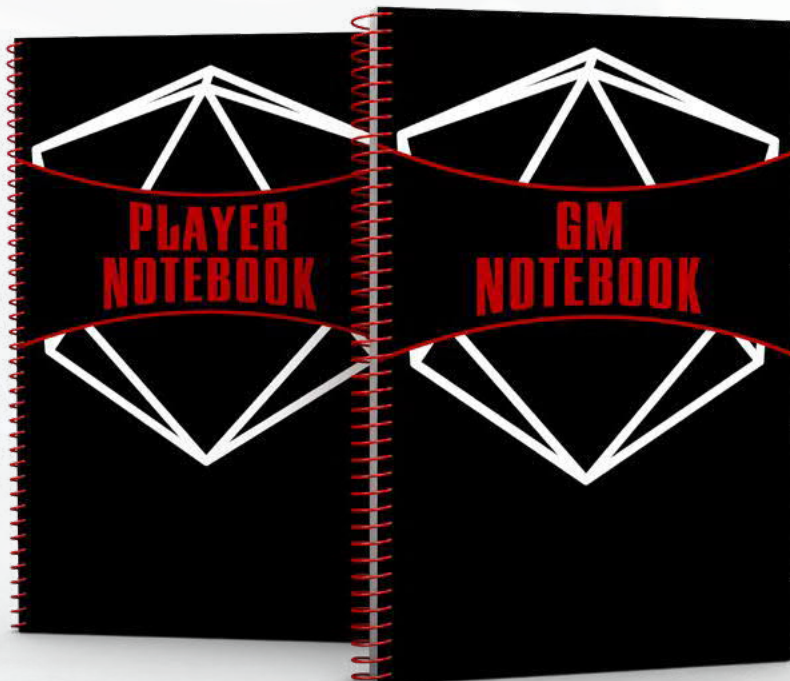
PRACTICAL CONCERNS

Let's take a look at the physical things you might want as a GM in addition to the obvious items like dice, paper, pens, and so on. (Also, don't forget that you might want to keep some mid-session inspiration material handy, as mentioned earlier.)

YOUR GM NOTES

You're going to need whatever notes you have prepared with you and organized in such a way that you can find things quickly. This is all the information you wrote down as you prepared for the game session ahead of time. They should probably include these things:

- ☞ NPC stats and information
- ☞ Location information
- ☞ Story information



In this case, story information includes your notes about timing or the implications of PC actions. For example, you might note that if an NPC gets overwhelmed, they try to escape through a secret door behind the bookcase. Or that three hours after the PCs arrive in town, the thief will try to pick their pockets to get the key they're carrying.

A CAMPAIGN JOURNAL

A campaign journal is different from your notes. You create your notes as you prepare for a session, but a journal is where you record the events of each session after they happen. It's useful, particularly in long-term campaigns or games where there are long breaks between sessions. You'll find it very handy to be able to refer back to see whether the PCs learned about both of the king's missing advisors or just one when they spoke to him three sessions ago.

Keep notes in your campaign journal about:

- ☞ NPCs encountered—particularly those that the PCs are likely to encounter again
- ☞ Places visited
- ☞ Significant events
- ☞ Clues or secrets learned

Of particular importance in your journal are your notes about any details you had to create on the fly during a session. If the PCs learned that the bartender's name was Richard and they go back there later, you need to remember Richard. And if he had a particular way of speaking or some other quirk, you'll want to remember that too.

THE GM SCREEN

A tool unique to the GM is the screen. If you've never seen or used one, it's a stand-up barrier that you place in front of you while you run the game. It's usually made of cardstock, but fancier ones are plastic or even wood. The side facing you has important game rule information you

might need to refer to, but the real point of a screen is so that you can have your notes on the table or roll your dice, and the players cannot see them.

The screen creates a sort of private GM space—a little portion of the game table that is just yours. If you use miniatures or props in your game, you can keep them behind the screen too and pull them out as needed. It can be useful and even comforting, in a way, to have a little space just for you. The side facing the players probably has some great evocative art on it so they have something to look at as well.

Of course, you might not want to hide your dice rolls behind a screen. Perhaps your style is to roll out in the open, making it clear that you're letting the true randomness inherent in the rules help guide the story. This is often referred to as “letting the dice roll as they may.” This means that if a PC has 3 hit points left and you're rolling to see how much damage the troll inflicts, and you roll a 7 for everyone to see, that PC is dead and there's no way for you to narrate around that.

Some people don't like GM screens specifically because they create a barrier between the GM and players. Some GMs feel “walled off” and separated from the rest of the group. They find it harder to have a conversation over the top of the screen (certainly, if you are below average height, a screen is likely to hide some or all of your face from the players). If you use facial expressions and gestures when you give descriptions or speak for an NPC, some of them might get lost behind the screen. Screens come in different shapes, though, and a landscape-oriented screen as opposed to a portrait-oriented screen might block less of you while still preventing players from seeing your notes and maps.

Honestly, if you're on the fence, think about whether you'd find it useful to have game information (important charts, tables, and rules reminders) in front of you all the time. If that sounds great, a screen might be for you. If it's something you'd never really look at, try to run the game without one.

Dice Fudging

You roll in secret to see how much damage the zombie inflicts on the PC, and the dice indicate that the character is going to die. You have a choice to make. Do they die, or do you fudge the roll and let them barely escape?

The issue here is really this: how obligated are you to go by what the rules or the dice say? And the answer is: as much as you want to be.

You can run a game where you look at your die rolls the same way that you look at a player's rolls—they dictate what they dictate, and everyone around the table, including you, abides by that. In the case above, the zombie kills the PC.

You can also run a game where everyone at the table agrees that the dice are a fun part of the game, but they don't control the game—the people do. If a die result makes for a bad story or a situation that's not any fun, you can fudge it. In the case above, the zombie probably doesn't kill the PC. Instead, maybe the PC is knocked unconscious at the feet of the zombie and the others have to save the fallen character, because that's a more interesting outcome.

You can even run a game where you tell the players that your die rolls are as sacrosanct as theirs—giving them a feeling that the stakes are quite high—but then still fudge those rolls occasionally without ever letting on. This puts you in a position of greater power over the story, but when the PCs succeed, the players will feel a greater accomplishment because they'll believe that you weren't softening the blows behind the scenes. This might seem dishonest, but often the fudged die rolls are needed because you misjudged how difficult a challenge would be, so really you're using them as a tool to rein things back in. In the case above, the zombie might kill the PC or it might not, depending on what you think is appropriate.

The Elegance of Saying No

by Bruce R. Cordell

As a GM, sometimes you must tell the PCs no. Usually it's because they fail to complete a task, such as researching important information, escaping from a collapsing portal, evading a powerful foe's attack, or failing to strike a well-protected enemy. Most of the time, it's appropriate to simply note the failure and move on. Other times, if the outcome is vital or if it has the potential to unlock new stories or new opportunities in the campaign, consider offering your players the result of their attempt as a qualified failure or a qualified success.

A qualified failure is not a complete failure; the situation is improved or changed instead of being an absolute defeat. A qualified success means things mostly go the PC's way, but not completely. In other words, you're essentially saying, "No, but . . ." or "Yes, but . . ."

The following qualified results are suitable to a variety of circumstances, plus a few fun corner cases. Use them directly, or let them inspire your own elegant ways of saying no.

COMBAT

- ☞ You miss, but distract your foe just enough that it doesn't finish its fiendish task for another round.
- ☞ You miss, but still manage to nick your foe. It's a scratch, but the graze makes it respect you.
- ☞ You hit, but in doing so, jostle an ally's attack, balance, concentration, or important task.
- ☞ You hit, but the effort reopened an old wound or you took a hit from the foe as you closed.
- ☞ You are missed, but the attack knocks you down, pushes you from a height, or shoves you somewhere dangerous.
- ☞ You are missed, but an ally of yours is hit instead.

- ☞ You are missed, but to escape you had to move so precipitously that you've become separated from your allies.
- ☞ You are hit, but your foe drops something invaluable to it in the process.
- ☞ You are hit, but you manage to graze your foe a little, too.
- ☞ You are hit, but you learn something about how your foe is operating that will give you an advantage later.
- ☞ Instead of being killed outright, you suffer an injury (or make a deal) that bothers you for some time to come.

GENERAL

- ☞ The research effort fails, but you make a contact that has other interesting opportunities to share.
- ☞ The research effort succeeds, but you also learn something that you wish you hadn't.
- ☞ The trail you're following grows cold, but you noticed something interesting back along your path.
- ☞ You track your quarry to where it's gone to ground, but it's found impressive allies and/or set an ambush.
- ☞ The stakeout is a bust, but you learned interesting information from an allied NPC while you waited.
- ☞ The repair task fails, but at least you learn which components are the problem; replacing them should do the trick.
- ☞ You emerge safely from the collapsing teleportation/interdimensional portal but are out of phase with reality.
- ☞ You successfully cause a distraction in the public house, but in doing so, accidentally set off a full-scale riot.
- ☞ Your contact will provide the information or object you seek, but only if you agree to take on a dangerous task.

CHAPTER 12: THE GM AND THE RULES

Frequently, players look to the GM to be an expert on the rules of the game. And that's often the case—frequently, it's the GM who teaches people how to play the game and answers rules questions. Sometimes, though, this arises from a recognition that the GM is the arbiter or interpreter of the rules. That's okay, but it's also important to recognize the difference between a rules expert and a rules arbiter.

KNOWING THE RULES

The title “game master” suggests that you know all the rules. And maybe you do, but it's okay if you don't. What you do need to do is *understand* the rules.

What I mean is that you don't need to remember every modifier that might affect a player's die roll when they make a skill check, but you do need to understand that circumstances will sometimes impose modifiers, positive or negative, on that kind of check. This is sometimes referred to as the spirit of the rules, rather than the letter of the rules (or sometimes the “rules as written,” or RAW). You need to understand in general how things are supposed to work: when die rolls are needed, how they work, and what sorts of exceptions can change how they work.

There are two reasons you want this understanding. The first is that you will sometimes want or need to come up with a ruling that's not covered in the rules (or perhaps something you just don't want to spend the time to look up). If you know that it's harder for someone to make an attack roll when they're in the dark, you can make a ruling that it's also harder when they're standing in a cloud of thick smoke.

The second reason you want to understand the spirit of the rules is that sometimes a player (or you) will find a loophole. If a character uses two abilities together, they suddenly get a +10 bonus to their die roll, when bonuses are usually only +1 or +2. Your understanding gives you

the ability to say, “That doesn't sound right,” and then you can make a ruling that closes the loophole and makes the bonus in question more reasonable.

In this way, understanding is much more valuable and useful than knowledge.

CHEATING

Depending on the game you're playing and your group's play style, you could legitimately say that the GM cannot cheat, but the players can. Some GMs fudge dice rolls or conveniently ignore certain rules, but they do it in the name of making a better story. The players don't really have this option, because they need to be able to make decisions for their characters based on an understanding of how the world works. If they can alter rules as they see fit, they're unlikely to make choices that their character (who certainly can't change the way the world works) would make. Of course, that same argument can be made for the GM to not “cheat” either, or that, at the very least, the GM should never allow the players to know they are cheating.

Numenera, a game I wrote, encourages the GM to alter things in the name of the story and states specifically, “that's not cheating—that's awesome!” On top of that, it has a game mechanic called the GM intrusion that is basically a rule that allows the GM to break a rule, but then give experience points to a PC as a reward for dealing with the challenge that arises. So, personally, I am in the camp of “the GM can't cheat, and in fact, the GM should do what others would call cheating all the time.”

I completely understand the other point of view, however. Players need consistency. A player can't make informed decisions about an action without consistency. If climbing up to the roof of a house is easy

one day and dangerously difficult the next, how can a player determine if that's something they want to do? And remember, the rules of the game are sort of the laws of reality in the fictional world you're creating and inhabiting, so if you routinely ignore them, the players will feel adrift. They won't know how things work, and that will make them reluctant to try anything.

Sometimes, you'll find that there's a rule that you always change or always ignore. It just seems to get in the way or make things less fun. That's where house rules come in. A change to the rules that you make every time isn't a fudge, it's a house rule.



HOUSE RULES

As arbiter of the rules, you are fully within your purview to alter the rules of the game as you see fit. Don't like the way the rules for initiative work in your game? Make some new ones that you think are more fun or more believable. There are two things to remember, however.

1. If you have house rules, you need to be very clear about them to the players. Just as the rules in the rulebook are there for anyone to see and understand, your house rules need to be out in the open and understood by all the players. You don't necessarily need to write them out like formal RPG rules (although that isn't a terrible idea), but everyone playing needs to be aware of them.
2. The players need to have some say in them too. Yes, the GM is the arbiter of the rules, but if everyone agreed to play *Savage Worlds* and you change the rules so drastically that it doesn't feel like *Savage Worlds* anymore, the players have a right to object.

Remember that house rules are different from table rules. A house rule is "If you roll a 20 on a d20, roll again and if you roll higher than a 15, you get double the effect of the original roll." A table rule is "If you roll a die and it rolls off the table and onto the floor, you have to roll again." House rules affect the rules of the game, and table rules are gameplay guidelines that everyone agrees to in order to make things move more smoothly. For more on table rules, see 193.

LOGIC AND BELIEVABILITY

Logic is one of your greatest tools. Logic allows you to make rulings that will make sense within the context of the game, and thus become less reliant on the rules as written. For example, if a character is on the wing of an airplane and that airplane is about to take off, they might want to jump from the wing to the ground. The game you're playing has rules for jumping, but nothing about jumping off a moving vehicle. You use

logic and say, “Okay, you’re going to hit the ground (obviously, you can’t miss), but it’s going to hurt because the plane’s already moving fast and the tarmac is hard concrete. You can make a die roll using your jump skill, and success or failure will indicate if you are able to land relatively safely. Even with a success, though, you’re going to take at least a little damage.”

That’s all just based on logic, not on actual game rules. The plane’s moving fast. The concrete is hard. The more you can apply logic to your rulings, the less often you’ll have to look up rules in a book and the more believable your game will feel. And feeling believable is the whole point. When you’re watching a movie and something happens that makes you say, “That doesn’t seem right,” that’s exactly the same feeling I am referring to here. You want everyone at the table, including you, to feel that things seem right in the story being told.

Of course, sometimes we all have differing opinions of what is logical. You might have a player who says that if their character leaps from the wing and rolls just right as they land, they wouldn’t take any damage. It’s your responsibility to hear the player out, but keep in mind these tips:

- ☞ Players are motivated to have their characters succeed and be safe, and this can sometimes alter what seems logical to them. In other words, they’re biased. Hopefully, you are not.
- ☞ If you think that the discussion of the topic is going to be long and take time away from the game, you should have the discussion, but have it after the session is over. This allows you to keep things moving for the benefit of everyone involved.
- ☞ As stated earlier, consistency is really important here. If you make a ruling based on logic in one circumstance, that same logic, if applicable, should apply to other circumstances as well.
- ☞ Ultimately, someone has to be the final arbiter, and that person is you. Still, be open to the views of others—sometimes they will bring up something you hadn’t considered, and maybe you should change your mind.

GAME BALANCE

Sometimes you’ll be called upon to make judgments about mechanics. Maybe you’ve created a new ability, or maybe a player is complaining because an item they have seems so inferior to a similar item another character has. If you’re making assessments about these kinds of things, you’re dealing with the issue of game balance.

“Game balance” is a term that gets tossed around a lot when discussing games. There are two problems with this. First, it’s one of those terms that gets used by people who think they know what it means, but often don’t. And second, even among those who know what it means, it means different things.

First and foremost, game balance is a way to “measure” mechanics. In almost every case, it’s just an assessment of a single game element—a special ability, a skill, a stat, a creature, a character, and so on. If that element works within the larger whole to everyone’s satisfaction, it’s balanced.

Let’s focus on the word “balance.” Game balance involves weighing two (or more) similar but different things to determine if they’re equal or unequal. What we can take away from that is you need more than one thing to judge balance. You can’t judge a game element for balance on its own without any larger context. I can’t say to you, “I think this knife should inflict 4 points of damage, does that seem balanced?” because you don’t even know what game I’m referring to. The only way you can say something is balanced or unbalanced is to also, basically in the same breath, say what you’ve compared it to in order to reach that conclusion. “I think a balanced amount of damage for this knife should be 4 points because a much larger cleaver inflicts 6 points.”

Many times, someone will try to talk about game balance by comparing the rule (or, to be more specific, the result of the rule) to reality. “This jump rule is unbalanced because it allows my character to leap farther than an Olympic medalist.” This might very well be an issue, but it’s one of believability, not game balance.

The other thing we can take away from the word “balance” is that two wildly dissimilar things can’t be balanced with each other. There has to be some meaningful common ground by which to measure them. This is where things can get a bit weird.

YOUR FLY SPELL AND MY HANDGUN

You can balance two weapons in how effective they are in dealing damage. You can balance two abilities that allow you to fly by comparing speed, duration, and things like that, but if you try to balance a handgun with a spell that allows you to fly, you will run into difficulties. Both might have numerical values, but they are incomparable ones. Worse, if the flying ability is a spell or superpower, it’s probably limited in use or duration. But unless there’s something really strange about it, the handgun’s only limitations are its range and ammo supply, and in many cases, the latter is just a matter of an extra trip to the store.

Here’s how a game designer *might* do it: if I fly, I can escape enemies trying to attack me with hand-to-hand combat. Ranged attacks (in this particular system, let’s say) don’t inflict as much damage, on average, as melee attacks. So the math might work out that, on average, my flyer takes 1 less point of damage each round. That means I can last longer in a fight—maybe three rounds longer, for the sake of argument. If I typically deal 3 points of damage in a round (at range) on average—figuring in how often I successfully attack versus how often I likely miss—that might mean the fly ability is the equivalent of 9 points of damage in an average combat encounter. The fact that this particular ability is usable only once per day (again, for the sake of argument) is sort of canceled out by all the additional utilitarian things I can do with flight, such as being immune to falling, the ability to go over walls without needing to climb, the ability to get a different vantage, and so on. The handgun, on the other hand, has a large magazine and we’ll say it’s in a setting with fairly available ammo, so it’s essentially always available to a character who owns it. It inflicts 5 points of damage. That’s 2 points higher than I would normally inflict, at range, so if the

typical combat encounter lasts five rounds, that’s 10 points of additional damage in the encounter. Thus, in this case, having the handgun is very slightly better than having the ability to fly for a while once per day. If both of these options are placed before a character, the handgun might cost \$1,100 while a book that will allow them to learn to cast a fly spell is \$1,000.

Here’s how I would recommend you do it as a GM: don’t. That’s right. Don’t bother. If everything in the previous paragraph seemed like nonsense to you, that’s okay. It sort of is. There are so many variables at work, and the attempts to measure these two dissimilar things on the same scale are so tortured, that it really doesn’t have a lot of practical value. In an RPG, a character might very well face a decision where they have to choose between getting a new handgun or learning to cast a fly spell, because RPGs are full of weird decision points like that, but it’s a subjective decision, and trying to make it seem objective smacks of deception. What’s more, you’re likely worrying over something that no one else at your table will concern themselves with. A player is going to make the choice that appeals to them, pay whatever price is attached, and move on.

Go with your gut, and if your decision proves to be problematic later, change it.

FAIRNESS

In the end, game balance is all about fairness, and fairness is almost entirely subjective. You want a player to feel like their character is up to reasonable challenges you place before them, and is more or less on par with the other PCs. If you can achieve that for the whole group, congratulations: everything is balanced.

Most fairness-based balance issues involve comparing two characters. Now, just like with two special abilities or items, it might look like you could balance two characters. But what metric are you using? Damage dealt? The ability to resist damage? Speed? Persuasiveness? Array of skills and abilities? Again, it’s all about context. In a

combat-heavy game, combat prowess might be the way to go, but in a game with little combat, judging everything by damage dealt is a little silly.

We often greatly underestimate the value of adaptability and a broad—as opposed to deep—array of abilities, mostly because in many RPG situations, breadth is not needed. Roleplaying games are most often group activities, and you’re almost certainly better off having everyone specialize in one important task than having many characters who have a little bit of skill in a lot of areas. If you’ve got someone who is really good at dealing damage, another who’s really good at taking damage, someone who excels at persuasion, someone focused on healing, and so on, a character who is only somewhat good at all of those things will always be outdone by the specialized characters. It will feel unfair and unbalanced. But take any one of the extremely specialized characters and put them in a situation alone, and they suddenly seem woefully inadequate. The damage dealer, for example, has no one to protect them, heal them, or talk their way out of a tricky situation. But that adaptable character with a broad set of abilities is far more likely to fare well on their own. In this context, the character tips the scales of balance all the way in the other direction.

Game balance in an RPG isn’t some mystical state you can achieve through precise mathematics or arcane guidelines. It might be, if all the characters did the same thing all the time and faced very similar challenges with very limited options. But RPGs aren’t like that. In a game that has advertised itself from the beginning as one in which you can do anything you can imagine, it can’t all be boiled down to a few numbers on a spreadsheet.

If everyone seems happy, the game is probably balanced. That’s all game balance does. That’s its solitary reason for existing—to make everyone at the table happy. Think of it as adjusting the equalizer settings on your speakers when you listen to music. If it sounds good to you and you’re turning knobs without hearing any difference, stop doing it. You’re wasting your time.



ASYMMETRICAL GAMING

If game balance means everyone is happy and it all seems fair and fun, that means that you can achieve it many ways. You can even achieve it with a group of PCs who have very different power levels.

In most games, the desirable outcome is that all the PCs are mostly equal. They might have different strengths and weaknesses, but they feel good to the players. And by “feel good,” I mean all the characters have interesting things to do, all have equal chances to shine, and all contribute. Could you accomplish that with a group of PCs who looked like the protagonists in *The Hobbit*—a bunch of fairly tough dwarves, an utterly inexperienced thief, and one of the most powerful wizards in the world?

Yes, you could.

This is called asymmetrical gaming. It's asymmetrical because some of the PCs are wildly different in scope and power. And the way to accomplish it is to ensure that everyone has something important to do. To continue with our *Hobbit* example, the dwarves have goblins to fight, the wizard has lore to call upon or spells to hurl, and the tiny thief has a reason to crawl around in narrow places in the dark.

If you were running a game with a group of PCs like that, you'd want to do two things:

1. Give everyone something different to do that plays to their strengths. The mighty wizard might take on a powerful foe by themselves while the dwarves fend off a horde of lesser creatures and the thief has to sneak by all of this to find the secret door and pull the lever behind it. It's a complex and dynamic encounter, but everyone's engaged in a different way. And as GM, it behooves you to give each task equal weight in terms of description, table time, and impact upon the final outcome.
2. Make sure that no character equals or outshines someone else's strength. If the wizard is all about powerful offensive spells, they shouldn't also be great at magical stealth—that's the thief's

thing. It should be clear that everyone fills a role so vital that the group couldn't succeed without them (even if that's not 100% true—as with all game balance issues, perception is the important part).

Asymmetrical gaming is more challenging for the GM. If players start to feel inadequate, you have to give them situations where they compare what they actually do as opposed to what they could do. Sure, the wizard could take out the horde of lesser creatures, but if they did that, the really powerful foe would find and kill the thief. Maybe the dwarves could find the secret door and get to it, but then the horde would overwhelm the wizard as they try to fight the powerful foe. The wizard might deal the most damage or have the best stats, but that's not the whole picture. Differentiation of abilities, the ability to work cooperatively, and an understanding outlook from everyone involved are what make asymmetrical games work.

BALANCING PLAYERS AND GM

Sometimes, when talking about game balance, we talk about NPCs run by the PCs and how they compare. This might come up in particular if an NPC has an ability that is similar to a PC's ability but it works differently. If a PC can run 50 feet and activate their telekinetic ability, but an NPC can run twice as far and still use a telekinetic effect, the player might feel cheated. Likewise, if an NPC has such amazing defenses that the PC cannot affect them with any sort of attack, the player might feel that things aren't fair and balanced.

In response to this, I'm going to pull out a word I've rarely if ever used. Poppycock!

NPCs shouldn't face all the same limitations (nor get all the same advantages) as PCs. They are different game elements, and it's a little useless to compare or contrast them, let alone try to make them perfectly equal. Take a step back and look at the situation from a broader perspective. In an RPG, PCs are often designed to feel balanced with

other PCs. They need to be durable, because like the stars of a movie, they're in almost every scene. If there's a danger that shows up in the game, they're facing it. If there's something that needs doing, they have to do it. But look at an NPC. Most of them have very, very minor roles. Even the dragon at the end of the big dungeon is probably, at most, one encounter in one session of the game. It's a big and important one—maybe the biggest in many sessions—but it's only onstage for a few hours at most. It's like the difference between drinking a beverage from your favorite personalized mug and one from a disposable paper cup that barely lasts through its single use. They might seem similar at first glance, but the user's needs in each case are very different.

To use the broadest of views, a PC is the main character in the story, while an NPC has a use in the story. You might need an NPC to be a really tough opponent or a knowledgeable source of information. The game stats of an NPC should reflect how they are used in the story or the need they fill. While the goal for creating NPCs is to make them feel like living, breathing inhabitants of the world, that's a setting issue. Focusing on them purely from a mechanical point of view, they're not characters with lives that continue after the PCs leave them behind. Only the PCs need to be robust enough to handle that.

Now, I'm not saying the GM should just ignore the rules. Game stats for what the GM does are good things. Game stats for NPCs and challenges provide a measuring stick so the GM is not caught off guard by the challenge of tasks for the PCs. (That's not saying that every challenge has to be perfectly suited to the PCs, but we'll get to that later.) Stats also provide consistency, which leads to verisimilitude and a greater understanding of how the world works and the PCs' place in it.

BALANCING CHALLENGES

Balancing the challenges to suit the PCs can be tricky. The perfect encounter is one that is challenging and exciting, but not so challenging that the PCs die or otherwise fail utterly. Of course, you don't want every encounter to be the same. Some should be easy. Why? Well, first off, it's more believable when encounters are different and some tasks are more difficult than others. Second, it's good to feel powerful, and overcoming an easy challenge gives the players that feeling. This is particularly true if a player has devoted their character to a specific action. If a player focused on making their character good at jumping, the opportunity to make an easy jump is satisfying—especially if the jump wouldn't have been easy if they hadn't built their character to be a good jumper.

You also want some encounters to be difficult. Sometimes you want to push the PCs to their limit. And sometimes, you want to show them that there are challenges they cannot overcome, and they have to avoid those challenges or find another way. Again, this is due largely to believability, but also because in most games, characters advance in capability over time, and you always want to give them something to aspire to.

So what you really want is a mix. As a general rule, I'd say a good breakdown might look at this:

- ☹ 10% of all encounters are easy for the PCs. They feel powerful, and not much time is spent on the scene.
- ☹ 20% of all encounters are challenging, but easy if the PCs do the smart thing, like bribing the clearly starving beasts with food.
- ☹ 50% of all encounters are challenging. This is a scene worth some time and attention.
- ☹ 15% of all encounters are very difficult. The PCs are pushed to their limits and need to use their best abilities, and use them wisely.
- ☹ 5% of all encounters are too difficult. The PCs should run, avoid the encounter, or surrender, or they will likely die.

In some gaming styles, the GM never gives any of this much thought. The challenges are what they are. If the PCs enter the lair of a powerful dragon and pick a fight, they all die. They should have known better. This is the “sandbox” approach, so called because the world is simply a sandbox the GM has set up and the PCs can go anywhere in it, but there are no safety nets if they go someplace where the challenges are too great for them. In a good sandbox game, however, the GM should provide clues or a chance for smart players to figure out where they should and shouldn't go. It's no fun if wandering south rather than east results in the instant death of all the PCs without warning.



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Last, it's important to remember that we're talking about balancing encounters here, not NPCs. Balancing an NPC to a PC, as stated earlier, is a waste of time. If the PCs are attacked by a gang of ruffians, it's silly to worry too much about how powerful an individual ruffian is compared to a PC when the GM can just decide there are more or fewer ruffians. In other words, it's not a single ruffian that is the challenge—it's the entire encounter. The same group of foes attacking by surprise at night is a different challenge than if the fight takes place in broad daylight and it's the ruffians who were surprised by the PCs.

RESOLVING TASKS AND DETERMINING DIFFICULTY

One of your biggest jobs is going to be helping to resolve tasks. The player wants their character to do something. You have to determine how difficult it will be to accomplish that. Usually, the player ends up rolling a die and then based on the difficulty you assigned, you all see if they succeed or fail. In many games, what you're doing is assigning a target number. You're saying the player needs to roll such-and-such a number (or higher, probably) on a certain die. As in, “Roll a 12 or higher on a d20 to succeed.”

DON'T ROLL EVERY TIME

Sometimes, an action will just work. Other times, an action is just impossible no matter what the player rolls. Rolling dice in these situations is a waste of everyone's time. Rolling dice, totaling up modifiers, and determining success or failure might take only a few moments, but when you figure that you do it perhaps hundreds of times in a game session, it adds up. Don't do it if it's not needed.

Some GMs have a motto that says, “When in doubt, have the player roll the dice.” That's a dangerous position, I think. You want to take more responsibility for resolving tasks than that. You want the ability to say, “Okay, that just happens” or “No, that can't happen” using logic. To use a silly example, if the PC says they want to walk across the room, and

then rolls the die but rolls abysmally, now you're put in a position where you feel compelled to explain how they failed to walk across the room. Likewise, if they say, "I launch an arrow at the moon" and then roll as high as the die will allow, are you expected to say that the arrow struck the moon? And if not, why did the player roll?

Similarly, it's also a bad idea if a player states their action, rolls, and *then* the GM determines if the roll means success or failure. Because you might find that the dice back you into a corner. A player shouldn't roll a die unless you're pretty sure you know what will happen on any given result of that die.

GRADUATED SUCCESS AND FAILURE

Task resolution doesn't have to be pass/fail. There are degrees of success and failure, and you can use them when resolving a task.

With this method, you set a difficulty as usual, but if the player rolls much higher than needed, their success is better than normal. Likewise, if the roll indicates that they failed, but they came close, you might rule it as a partial success.

For example, a PC tracking the bandits that robbed the train looks for tracks in the woods to see if any of them came down a certain path recently. Given the terrain and the weather, the GM determines the difficulty, deciding that the player needs to roll a 12 on a d20. The player rolls a 10. This isn't enough to accomplish the task that the PC set out to do, but since they came very close, the GM decides that they still learn that something came down the path recently—they just aren't certain if it was bandits. Similarly, if the player had rolled a 17, the GM could have said that not only did they find bandit tracks, but there were five of them, and their tracks show that they were burdened. In other words, the player would have received more information than they asked for.

In a situation where there are more results than simply success or failure, the GM can convey them with multiple difficulties. A player can state an action, and a GM can come up with not one difficulty but two, three, or more. For example, if the PCs try to persuade a merchant to

give them information, the GM can determine that the merchant gives them one minor bit of information if they roll a 6 or higher, a fair bit of information if they roll a 12 or higher, and everything he knows on the topic if they roll a 16 or higher. The players don't make three different rolls. They make one roll with a scaled, graduated success.

As a rule of thumb, reverse-engineer the situation. If the player rolls considerably higher or lower than the target number, consider what a success at the difficulty he did overcome would have gained him. If creating a makeshift electronic key to open a sealed door has a target number of 18, what does the PC create if the player rolls 16? Perhaps the answer is nothing, or perhaps it is a makeshift key that works intermittently.

This system is rarely (if ever) used in combat or in situations where something either works or doesn't. But when crafting an object, interacting with an NPC, or gaining information, it can be very useful. Of course, the GM is never required to use this model of task resolution—sometimes success or failure is all you need to know.

Finally, sometimes a GM can offer a "consolation prize" for trying. Say a PC fears that a door has been rigged with a trap. They search it but fail the roll. The GM might still reveal something about the door. "You don't find anything special, but you note that the door appears quite sturdy and is locked." It's the kind of information the GM might give automatically, but it softens the blow of failure. Some information is better than none, and it makes sense that the PC will learn at least something if they study an object for a few minutes.

ENCOURAGING PLAYER CREATIVITY

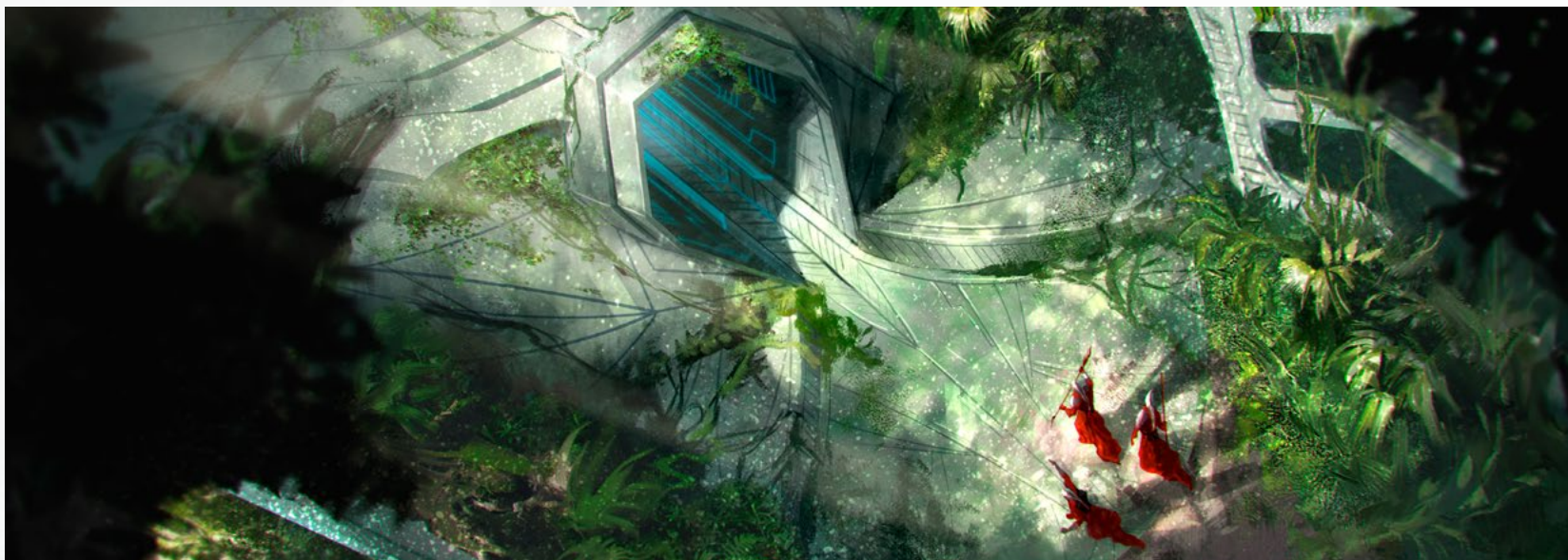
When resolving actions, it's valuable to reward ingenuity even more than good die rolls or efficiently created characters. The players should succeed not just because they get lucky with the dice or they chose all the "right" options when creating their characters, but because they come up with the best ideas when facing challenges. This means that for every challenge, there should be a straightforward solution (destroy the lightning-emitting turret to get into the tower) and a not-so-straightforward one (sneak up

to the tower, find the power conduit to the turret, and sever it). It's not your responsibility as the GM to come up with both. The players will come up with the not-so-straightforward solutions. You just have to be willing to go with their ideas.

This doesn't mean you have to let them succeed just because they try something you hadn't thought of. On the contrary, the not-so-straightforward solution might end up being as hard or harder than the straightforward one. But you have to be ready to adjudicate the idea no matter what. It's tempting to say that there's no way to find or sever the power conduit and the PCs have to destroy the turret the old-fashioned way (a combat encounter). In some situations, that might be appropriate—perhaps the conduit is simply not accessible to the PCs on the outside of the tower. But a GM has to be willing to say that sometimes it is possible and adjudicate the details on the fly. If you don't, and you shut down the players' outside-the-box ideas, they will learn that the only thing to do is charge blindly into the fray every time. That the obvious solution is the only possible solution. Eventually, this

will make for boring play because things will seem repetitive and too tightly structured.

The best solution is not to develop preconceived notions of how the PCs might deal with the encounters in an adventure. If they're going to break into a tower, you can note that the tower has a few guards, a pressure-sensitive intruder alert system around the perimeter, and a lightning-emitting turret on the top. But you don't know if the PCs will fight the guards, bribe them, or sneak past them. You don't know how they're going to deal with the alert system and the turret. That's not the kind of thing you need to think about ahead of time, but you have to be ready when it comes up at the table. You should prepare for the most obvious situations—for example, predetermine the strength of the turret and how much damage it does. But when a player states that their action is to look around for spots where the turret cannot strike because a wall blocks it or the angle prevents it, that's when you take a second to consider and maybe say, "Yes, as a matter of fact, there is a spot," even if no such thing had occurred to you before that moment.



Bending the Rules

by Matthew Mercer

Stories can take all kinds of forms. What tabletop RPGs provide is a framework to collaboratively weave and craft unique, improvised stories as a team. Rules act as a skeleton structure that provides familiarity, form, and tools to fall back on when the next step, choice, or outcome of the narrative is uncertain. They provide uniformity of play between players and GM, a common language in which everyone at the table can feel comfortable in fairness of chance, action, and consequence . . . and when you are comfortable enough, I recommend that you let your players bend them a little.

As a game master, I believe there can be renewed joy in enabling and giving permission to experienced players to step outside the box and challenge their own comfort within the rules. Remind them of those crazy early days when they first started to play, without mastered understanding of the structure, and goad them into rediscovering those flexible boundaries. Does someone have a crazy idea not wholly covered in the rules? Does it seem a bit of a stretch, reaching beyond what the rules seem to allow? Don't shoot it down immediately! Ask yourself if any fun at the table is lost in allowing it a chance to succeed. Consider allowing it, and encourage others to offer their own creative flex on their own well-established abilities and skills. It may lead to spectacular success or spectacular failure. If the players know they have your permission, and the ideas promote a fun, collaborative story, who cares if the rules "bend" a little? The wild adventures that ensue will often be filled with laughter and cheers.

I personally cherish an opportunity to run a game for someone entirely new to an RPG system, or even the RPG experience entirely. Without a historical reverence for the rules and an understanding of many games' roots in rules-heavy simulation, these players often provide entirely unique, creative answers to your story's challenges, thinking outside the box that a rule system (often unintentionally) tells you to stay in. The joy of those moments of pure creative spark always stick with me and can lead to truly memorable scenes that you will recall among your friends for years to come.

As the new player becomes more experienced, eager to learn and better their grasp of the rules, they begin to stay within that system's box more and more. They can begin to abandon those wild, creative solutions to narrative challenges, choosing to exist squarely within the bounds of the rules. They find comfort within those rules, and take pride in never breaking them.

And that can be great! Many players and groups find their bliss in running a perfect simulation, sticking within the confines and mastering the entirety of what is within.

However, openly reminding your players, old and new, that they have permission to creatively bend the rules a little is a beautiful freedom that lets all parties continue to capitalize on their imagination.

CHAPTER 13: BEING A DYNAMIC GM

So far, we've mostly examined the basics of how to be a game master. But what about those of us who have done this for a while and want to take things to the next level? How do you become a great GM? This chapter offers some tips.

HOW TO START A CAMPAIGN

Although I wrote earlier about ending a campaign, it's probably just as important—maybe even more important—to talk about starting one.

SESSION "ZERO"

One of the things you can do to get the game off to the right start is have a session where everyone creates their characters *together*. In this session "zero," you also go over the background of the campaign, introduce any house rules, and talk about expectations. And you listen to the players and learn what they want to get out of it.

Players all making their characters in the same room allows them to coordinate their backgrounds, establish bonds, and generally get to know the PCs in the group before the action starts.

CAMPAIGN PROLOGUE(S)

You can also start a campaign by allowing each player to establish their character in a short, one-on-one session with you that is set before the campaign begins. This might just be a chance to "test drive" the character and help establish a personality and an outlook without the noise of three to five other players doing the same thing in the first session. This can be particularly useful if the player is a bit quiet in a larger group.

These prologue sessions can be a way to plant the seeds for upcoming adventures in the campaign, and help give each character a personalized reason for why they are involved. They're also great for new

players, who can dip their toe in the water, so to speak, without having to do so in front of a group.

PLAYER ADVENTURE SEEDS

As each player creates their character and backstory, have them provide three to five adventure seeds. These should be a mixture of stories that use something in their background (such as a mentor, a family member, a foe, or a location) and ones that are aspirational. For example, if a player really wants their character to become a powerful and knowledgeable mage, an aspirational adventure seed might be a rumor that a book of potent magic long thought lost has been found in the land of Turan.

CHECK IN WITH THE PLAYERS

At various times throughout the campaign, ask the players how they're doing and how they're liking the game. You can do this at the end of a session or at the beginning of a session, or you can ask the players individually. You could do it via email or text.

LEARN HOW THINGS ARE GOING

You want to be sure they're having fun and there are no concerns or issues that you're not aware of. What you're not interested in, though, is fishing for compliments. The way to get real feedback is to say, "Is there something that would make the game more enjoyable for you?" Now, some players will reply, "I'd like more magical swords" or something like that. You can probably ignore them (although "I'd like to get more interesting rewards for our missions" is valuable feedback, if that's what they mean). But if someone says, "I wish there were more puzzles to solve" or "I wish the quests we undertake weren't always so long," that kind of thing is valuable feedback. Use it.

You might also get responses from a player saying that one of the other players makes them feel annoyed, impatient, or even generally uncomfortable. You should take these comments seriously, but it's not your duty alone to deal with issues like that. You should try to involve at least one other player in this situation, if not the whole group. For more about player personal issues, see Chapter 17: Solving Game Group Problems, page 217.

REFRESH YOUR MEMORY AND THEIRS

Sometimes, particularly when you are going to tie an aspect of an upcoming adventure with something that happened in the past, you can inquire with the players to learn what they know and don't know about what happened earlier. For example, if one character has been looking for their lost brother and spent a lot of time early in the campaign gathering clues about his disappearance, and now, months later, you plan to introduce a new reference to the missing brother, you might check in with that player (or all the players) and simply say, "Tell me what you have learned about your brother's disappearance."

This accomplishes two things. First, it allows you to be reminded of specific details you might not remember. When you know the whole story, sometimes it can be easy to forget what the players know and don't know. Second, it encourages the players to reacquaint themselves with information that they'll likely need to draw upon in an upcoming session, but to do it ahead of time.

CHARACTER SUMMARIES

One way to get feedback of a slightly different kind is to have what you could call a "character summaries" portion of every session, at the end. The idea is pretty simple. At the end of a session, go around the table and everyone describes how the events of the game affected their character. One person might say, "Well, my character is really interested in alien civilizations, so the fact that we got to explore the derelict alien starship was really great." And another might say, "I was really afraid of

the warbot that attacked us as we got into the airlock. I thought we were goners." But a third might say, "I really like combat, so I was actually a little sad when Bill's technician deactivated the warbot from afar and we spent the rest of the session just walking around in an old spaceship." Character summaries are particularly useful if you're using the character arcs found in Chapter 7: Character Arcs and Player Bonds, page 71. In the summary portion, you and the player can quickly determine if any steps in an arc have been accomplished.

Character summaries offer valuable feedback, both positive and negative. The process involves more than just player-to-GM feedback, of course. It encourages players to really think about the events of a session and how their characters were affected beyond how much damage they took or how many spells they cast. If you make this a regular routine, you'll probably find that player responses get longer and deeper. Instead of just "I liked this or that" summaries, players will start getting in-depth and talking about their character's inner emotional life.

SETTING THE TONE

Tone for certain games is really important. If you want to run a horror game with real chills and scares, don't do it in a brightly lit room with everyone laughing and making jokes. At the same time, if you want to run a light-hearted, extremely casual game, you can't do it if everyone's taking it much too seriously.

CONTROL THE ENVIRONMENT

If you're a director, you don't rely on the actors to convey the mood of your play. You set the stage. You control the lighting. You use music and props. As a GM, you can set the stage using exactly the same tools.

If you're not the host of the game, or if you're not playing in a private space, your control of the environment might be limited. Sometimes, though, you can work with the host to make reasonable suggestions to help convey the mood.

Dim the lights. Dimmer-than-normal lights convey nighttime, or a general creepiness. Candles convey flickering torchlight. You'll find that dimming the lights alone brings a seriousness to the game, and says to the players that they need to pay closer attention. It's just human psychology. Just make sure that everyone can see. And if you're using a lot of candles, be safe. A house fire is probably not suitable to any game's tone.

In theory, for some scenes, you might want to brighten the lights. But that's going to be the exception, not the rule.

Play music. Find some kind of music that is appropriate to the setting or the events of the session. Movie soundtracks of the same genre as your game, for example, are good for some situations, but you can go further afield than that. Historical games offer up their own possibilities for playing music appropriate to the time period. Just don't play the music so loud that the players can't hear you or each other—unless, of course, you're setting the scene in a loud club and the volume and driving beat are the tone you want.

Props. RPGs are games of conversation. For the most part, we talk and we listen. So any time you have the opportunity to break out of that and convey information in some other way, do it. When getting information about the game world, it's so striking to be able to use senses other than hearing that a prop a player can actually hold in their hand takes on a significance it might not otherwise have.

Props don't have to be elaborate affairs. You don't have to spend hundreds of dollars at a Renaissance Faire. The most obvious props are things like notes, letters, maps, or a page from a journal. These are things you can easily make yourself. Rather than describing what the PCs read in the note they get from the messenger, hand them a piece of paper with those words on it and let them read it themselves. Not only is this a visceral experience, it's something they can refer back to when needed.

Can't draw a map? Got messy handwriting? Don't worry—the fact that it's hard to figure out is part of the experience you're giving to the players.

If you use a lot of props, sometimes it's useful to have one player be the designated keeper of the props.

Cosplay. Encourage your players to dress like their characters, or at least in something that evokes their characters. Come to the game yourself dressed like an important NPC. Cosplay (a word formed from “costume play”) is not for everyone, but if you've got people who already like this sort of thing, use it to your advantage. Again, it doesn't have to be elaborate. If the characters are exploring an arctic base, have everyone wear stocking caps. It conveys mood and it gets the game out of any ruts it might otherwise fall into.

VOCABULARY

While you're at the table, everything you do or say contributes to the tone. And not just what you say, but how you say it. So use the right words. If you're running a hard sci fi game, use scientific words. If you're running a space opera game, use technical-sounding made-up jargon. If you're running a medieval game, inject words like *troubadours*, *villeins*, *fiefdom*, *abbey*, and so on into what you say. Learn the names for various parts of a knight's armor and the various locations in a castle and use them.

Don't use modern slang unless it's a modern game. Don't use modern comparisons (cars, smartphones) when describing magical things or high-tech devices.

Think of it this way—the setting is your character. Stay in character.

IMPOSE THE TONE

Ultimately, it's the players who must be immersed in the game, not the characters. You can do things on a metagame level to (or with) the players that reflects what's going on with the characters.

For example, if the PCs are attending a banquet, have some tasty food for the players. If the characters need to make a long trek, have everyone get up from the table and walk around the room (in marching order, of course!).

If you want the players to be a bit uncomfortable, ill at ease, or on the edge, don't let them sit in their well-worn, comfortable spot at the game table. Make them sit in a new place. Or maybe don't let them sit at all, at least for the most uncomfortable scene. If you normally play around the kitchen table, play in the living room on the floor. Shake things up.

If the characters are in an authoritarian dystopia, be harsher with your GM rulings and stricter with the rules, offering little explanation for your reasoning. If they've found shelter amid the elves of the forest, smile and speak in soothing tones even as you give descriptions or adjudicate the rules (generously).

USING YOUR TOOLS

You, of course, are your own best tool. Learn how to use what you have at your disposal to take your GMing to the next level.

MOVE AROUND

There's a temptation to sit at the game table, perhaps half hidden by a GM screen, and run the whole game from that sedentary position. But consider how much more dynamic you can be if you stand up and move around. Your gestures become larger, you ensure that everyone can see your face, and you'll energize yourself in ways that will help bring excitement to the game. If something happens to one player's character in particular, get up and walk over to them. Use your whole body to gesture, not just your hands. If the noble knight approaches the PCs, get down on one knee and bow your head. If the military commander is chewing them out, stand over them imperiously with your chest thrust forward and your face grim. In a horror game, lurk behind the players as they sit at the table so that sometimes they're not sure what you're doing or where you are. This is the very definition of dynamic GMing.

Of course, you don't have to stand or walk around the whole time. In fact, you should do it as a way to punctuate and convey the mood. When things happen with sudden action, leap to your feet!



Is This Your Paranoia?

by Jennell Jaquays

Q: Who best understands what motivates, intrigues, or terrifies your players?

A: It's them, your players! They do! And if you give them a chance, they'll tell you. Not in so many words, but in how they react to the small mysteries you present as the GM.

I love dice tables and using random association as creative inspiration. One of my favorite techniques is to create dice table lists of curiosities: quirky, evocative, seemingly out-of-context objects, set pieces, or situations that could be plugged into nearly any location in my adventures. My lists include things like out-of-place household objects such as a flower pot or a brightly colored kitchen chair, or a circle of polished river stones on the ground, or a bag of red glittery marbles, or maybe even a door standing free in the middle of a chamber. The descriptions are rarely longer than what I've shared, just enough to pique curiosity. The lists can be entirely generic, or customized specifically for an adventure setting.

These curiosities ask to be noticed. During play, I specifically include them in my descriptions as the players' characters explore. The point I want to stress is that when I design the actual spaces, those objects are not in them. They exist only in my object lists. I set a chance that one might appear in a given space, and again let chance determine what might be found.

Once curiosities are encountered, I let my players' reactions suggest what happens next. It's like the joke where a GM tells the players they see a warehouse, one asks if that's someone who turns into a house under the full moon, and the GM responds, "It is now." Are your players curious? Are they fearful, paranoid that you've set a horrible trap in their midst? Do they expect the curiosity to be magical, valuable, or relevant to their characters' stories? Listen to their responses and use that as a guide for each curiosity they encounter.

In my games, a bag of red marbles became a box of low-powered fireball grenades. A randomly encountered door in the middle of a room teleported a party away from a monster that otherwise would have destroyed them. A decorative chair could become a valuable antique, end up as firewood, or be the inanimate form of a mimicry monster starving for a bite of rump steak.

Let inspiration and imagination define what goes into your curiosity lists. Odder is often better. You can create a single universal list, applicable to every game you will ever run, or many smaller lists, particular to an adventure setting or story path. Strive for the unusual and unexpected, then let your players guide you the rest of the way.

Oh. One last bit of advice. Don't tell your players you randomly put that curiosity in their way. Let them assume it was always there.

VOICES

Not everyone can do an array of voices and accents. But practically everyone can make their voice lower, higher, louder, softer, and so on. Attach a vocal quality to every major and some not-so-major NPCs. Even if you have a range of only five different voices, use them all. As long as you space them out and don't have two low-speakers right after each other, you'll still be using your voice effectively to convey character.

Obviously, overblown, racist accents are never a good idea.

ADVANCED DESCRIPTION

While I've written earlier about the importance of description, a dynamic GM takes it a step further. One could easily forgive someone for thinking that GM description is just the game master telling the players what they see, hear, smell, and so on. (Don't forget about smell, by the way—it's always particularly evocative.) But description can be so much more.

First of all, don't overlook the cues you give to players by how you talk about things, as opposed to just what you say. If you spend table time describing something in detail, it should be important. Don't spend a great deal of time describing the rat scurrying down the drainage pipe unless somehow that rat is the key to the whole scene. Whatever you dwell on, the players will dwell on.

For particularly important scenes or people, you can write down the description ahead of time and read it at the table. This accomplishes two things—it makes that description precisely what you want it to be, with the proper elegance (or terror), and it is an obvious cue to the players that what you're describing is important. Be aware, however, that if you do this a lot, or if you read a lot of descriptions provided by a published adventure, the exact opposite will happen, and the players will start to tune it out. They're not there to be read to—they want to be part of a game.

Another tactic is to describe things only generally and allow the players to ask questions. By asking, "Are there a lot of books on the

bookcase?" what they're actually telling you is, "I go over and look at the bookcase." In other words, you're creating a situation where, by asking for more information, the player is telling you what their action is. And because your general description doesn't focus on any one object or person in the scene, you're not giving metagame clues by accidentally providing too much detail about the important things.

However, sometimes you might *want* to give metagame clues. You want to subtly draw the players' attention to the grandfather clock next to the bookcase, because that's where the gold has been stashed, so you give it a little bit of emphasis in your description. Maybe an extra sentence or a stressed word, or maybe you look into one player's eyes just as you mention the clock. What you're doing is acknowledging that the PCs are smart, perceptive, attentive, and lucky, so the important parts of a scene are more likely, perhaps, to draw their attention in the same way that Sherlock Holmes might go right to the clock based on insight, observation, and intuition.

In poker, players can tell when another player is bluffing by unconscious mannerisms they display called "tells." Become aware of your own tells as a GM. Back in college, I was running a long campaign using a game called Rolemaster. The PCs were exploring a dungeon and had penetrated its deepest areas. I described an NPC they encountered as a shirtless, barefoot man who looked calm. The players all said, "Uh oh." I asked why they reacted that way. They said that as they had gone deeper in the dungeon, the NPCs they encountered grew better and better equipped, and I'd described their impressive armor, gear, and magical weapons. They'd learned that the more I described an NPC's stuff, the tougher they were. However, if an NPC had nothing—particularly so deep in a dungeon—that meant they were *really* powerful. I had no idea that I had created this NPC code, but sure enough, they were right.

The point is, make sure that the information you convey with your descriptions is the information you *want* to convey. You can accidentally reveal the murderer in a mystery by dwelling on them too long, but

sometimes you can do the same thing by not focusing on them enough. I've written earlier that listening is an important GM skill. Sometimes, that means listening to yourself.

DESCRIBE EMOTIONS

This is a tricky subject because you don't want to tell the players how their characters feel, yet as humans we perceive the world through a lens of emotion. Certain sounds are terrifying. Some sights delight us or give us hope (depending on the situation). Injecting emotions into your descriptions—again, used carefully—can add a great deal of impact.

Consider the following examples:

- ☞ “Then, over the hill, through the morning mist, you see a glimmer. And then the glimmer becomes a light. That light brings with it hope, as the reinforcements for the beleaguered defenders have finally arrived.”
- ☞ “The evil spell slips into your mind like a serpent, slithering its way into the nooks and crannies of your consciousness, a thing of pure revulsion and fear.”
- ☞ “The glen, bathed in the moonlight and filled with the welcoming faerie folk, brings a moment of calm to your heart.”

They're not outright intrusive, but they convey emotions in addition to sensory input. In this way, your description does double duty. It conveys both information and tone. The difference between “You see a withered old tree with branches swaying in the wind” and “The dead tree, silhouetted in the dying light of day, looks like an old crone, beckoning you into a trap with her withered limbs” is huge without having to be so overt and intrusive as saying “You are creeped out by the tree.”

Who Talks the Most?

In a game that is played almost entirely through conversation, it's probably worth talking about . . . talking. Specifically, setting the expectation of who talks the most at the table. Now, given that you're reading this in a chapter about game mastering, you've probably already figured out what the answer is. It's almost certainly the GM. In a typical game, particularly during an action sequence, the GM describes the scene, and then it's Player 1's turn to state their action. The GM responds. Then it's Player 2's turn to talk. The GM responds. And so on. Sometimes, to provide all the details that the players need, the GM has to talk a lot, giving descriptions and answering questions.

However, despite all this, here's something that I suspect experienced GMs will find to be true: the less the GM talks, the better the game session. The more the GM can just sit back and let the players talk to each other, describe their characters and their actions, and formulate plans together, the more engaged the players are. Just sitting and listening all session long can be rough on a player, but a little listening proves remarkably valuable to the GM. While the players are talking, the GM can be checking notes, planning the next thing that happens, or just gathering intel about what the players know, what they don't know, what they want out of the game, and whether they're enjoying themselves. Sometimes the most valuable GM skill is listening.

DON'T PROVIDE SPECIFICITY UNLESS ASKED

You don't need to tell the players how many crates are in the storeroom. In fact, you shouldn't—not only because it's almost certainly not important, but also because the implication is that someone took the time and counted.

An exact count of items should almost never be in your initial description. First, most people don't (and often can't) count large numbers of things in a hurry or in a stressful situation. If I asked you

“Remember that scene in *Star Wars* when a bunch of stormtroopers came into the hangar on Tatooine as the *Millennium Falcon* was taking off?” you’d probably say yes. But if I asked you how many stormtroopers there were, could you tell me? Almost certainly not. And there weren’t that many of them. But at no point do we get a clear look at all of them, and they’re moving around while shooting, and they all look similar.

Second, don’t provide an accurate count unless a player asks for it. Because a player asking that question is actually stating an action. Basically, “I count the number of stormtroopers,” or perhaps more appropriately, “I try to get a clear picture of the situation.”

If you’re running a horror game or you simply want to instill a little unease in any game, consider how unsettling it can be to *never* give certain precise details. If you tell the players that the monster has “too many legs,” that conveys both information and mood in a way that telling them it has ten legs never would. If a hulking, shambling thing looms over the players but you never give it a precise height, each player will, in turn, conjure up their own mental image of what that means.

You can do the same with things like direction and distance. It’s hard to know precisely which direction a strange knocking sound is coming from when you’re exploring a creepy old house. Did it come from upstairs or from the next room over? Realistically, it’s hard to tell. Narratively, it’s effective not to tell. The unknown quality of it is creepy. Similarly, deep in the dimly lit dungeon, can the PCs really tell that the orcs are 35 feet away? Distance is something that most people are actually *bad* at estimating. Even if you give the PCs credit for being capable adventurers, the exact distance between two things might take them some time to estimate.

Of course, you can vary your descriptions based on the character. A mathematical mage or an outdoorsy ranger might be able to calculate that the top of the hill is 450 feet away, but to the rogue it’s just “pretty far.” Likewise, you might say to a robot-building tech that they see a Mark IV B-17 series wardroid, whereas everyone else just sees a “big scary-looking robot.” The additional information appropriate to a

character can come immediately, or it can come later. In an encounter with an angel, the most perceptive of the PCs might notice that the feathered wings on the entity’s back are fake. Perhaps it’s not really an angel at all, but only one character realizes it.

What I’m getting to with all of this could be summed up in one statement: eschew the idea that you’re describing an objective reality. Putting aside the philosophical debate regarding whether there even is such a thing, remember that the description you provide is what the players perceive, not necessarily what is there. “You see a shadow moving in the trees.” That’s all you give them because that’s all they can perceive, at least at that moment. In the players’ minds, they each might see a different shape of shadow. One might imagine an enemy soldier while another might think it’s a deer. That’s okay, because that’s actually the way it works. Ask three different people to give an accounting of an event after the fact and you’ll get three different descriptions.

Play with the fact that we are all our own unreliable narrator. Characters might mistake a house settling for something more dangerous. One PC might be sure that there are four foes, while another is aware of only three. Sometimes the snapping twig in the distance is never explained. Sometimes the heroes don’t realize that the monster was a man in a mask until he’s lying unconscious at their feet after they’ve beaten him up.

KNOW YOUR PLAYERS

Use any sort of common experience you have with one or more of your players. “The temple looks a little bit like the big Methodist church on Maple Street, except with a huge statue of an angel in front.” This is almost a sort of secret language that you and your close friends share, and you should use it. Your GM voice—the words you use to describe and narrate—doesn’t need to be detached or authorial. Sometimes a description that’s more casual or familiar conveys more details.



ADVANCED TIMING

I've written that timing is one of the keys to good GMing. But there are some advanced techniques you might want to consider.

STARTING THINGS WITH ACTION

Imagine that the last session ended with the PCs having decided to return to town after exploring a ruined castle. You start the next session with "Roll for initiative!" And then you start describing a battle the PCs suddenly find themselves in with hulking, hairy brutes wielding morningstars, without a lot of explanation. The confusion on the players' part might get a few of them on edge, but that's the point. It's tense, disorienting, and harsh, but at the same time thrilling and hopefully fun (if combats in your game are fun).

Once the combat is concluded, only then do you roll back time with a bit of exposition and explain that on the PCs' way back to town, bugbear marauders streamed out of the woods in ambush. And, in fact, the travelers the PCs had met on the road earlier that day had warned of bands of hairy beastfolk that were slaughtering innocents.

Not only does this start the session off with a bang as opposed to a scene of traveling down the road and talking with passersby, it then segues right into what you hope will be the next adventure—dealing with the bugbear marauders. It gives the session immediate direction and purpose.

Surprisingly enough, this is a particularly interesting technique to use if there's been a long gap between sessions. If it's been quite a while since the last time you all got together, you might end up spending a lot of the session spinning wheels at the beginning, trying to remember what happened before and getting back into the swing of things. An action scene clears away the proverbial cobwebs quickly and restores the flow of things faster than a slower reintroduction.

PLAYING WITH TIME

To start a session with action, as described in the previous section, you have to play with time. You begin the session by advancing time just a bit, and later go back to fill in that time. But you can take this idea further.

FLASHBACKS

Imagine, for example, in the middle of a session of a horror campaign, you suddenly set a new scene, and you announce that it's actually a flashback to a few weeks earlier when the PCs were visiting an old manor to speak with the old woman who lived there about her late husband—the man whose ghost they encountered the session prior. You play through the flashback with the creepy old woman, and in the course of the conversation, the PCs learn a few things that might be clues as to why the man's ghost is now haunting them. Plus, one of them spots a symbol on the spine of an old book that seems curious. Then you return the PCs to the present. The ghost returns, and they have to deal with him, but now they've got new information. What's more, the same PC who noticed the symbol on the book now sees that the ghost bears the same symbol blazing like fire in his otherwise black eyes. It must all be connected!

Why do this as a flashback? Well, when a writer is writing a story, they often realize that they need an earlier scene to make the current scene work. That's easy to do with a word processor, but tougher in an RPG campaign. Maybe only after the initial encounter with the ghost do you realize that the PCs need more information. With a flashback, you can insert the earlier scene into the narrative. Or maybe you aren't revising anything. Maybe you just decided that it works better as a flashback because you wanted to start things out with the ghostly encounter before you played through the informative scene.

Either way, for flashbacks to work, everyone has to be on board. The players (not the characters) have to know they're in a flashback and understand that they can't use this as an opportunity to create a

narrative problem. In the middle of the conversation with the creepy old woman, one character can't run outside and put gas in the car because they remembered that it ran out of gas in the later scene. That's unfair metagame (meta-narrative) thinking. You can still have die rolls and game mechanics in a flashback, as success or failure in the encounter is still important and can help drive the action. You just can't have the result of a die roll or player action change the future in some weird way. A PC can't die in a flashback scene, for example, unless coming back from the dead is easy in your campaign.

But here's what's even more amazing if you're open to flashback scenes. They can be player-initiated rather than GM-initiated. Say the PCs are preparing for a trek into a dangerous forest. They're ready to go, but then they realize that they wish they had hired a guide. One of the players asks, "Any chance that we could have found someone in town to help lead us through these woods?" You suddenly establish a scene back in town. The PCs are in a shop, buying gear, and one of the shopkeepers says, "So you're looking for a guide, eh?" You can then play through this encounter with the PCs making appropriate rolls to persuade or discern trustworthiness or even haggle over a price. In this case, the success or failure of the PCs' actions in the flashback scene determines whether they have a guide or not in the present.

FAST-FORWARDS

Not quite the opposite of a flashback, a fast-forward is you speeding through time more quickly than normal to get to a new scene. Say an enemy army is on the march, and the PCs' home town is in their path. The army won't reach the town for six months, so the inhabitants begin planning and building defenses (probably with the PCs' help). Rather than play through all the planning, building, training, and whatnot, you fast-forward six months and it's the night before the enemy army is going to attack. The defenses are all built, and the action is ready to start. The PCs can make any last-minute preparations for themselves. However, in the course of the coming battle, you now can be really

generous with player ideas. When the enemy approaches the town's newly fashioned main gate, a player might state, "I think we would have advised the town's leaders to make a special defensive position for the wizard next to the gate so they can hurl fireballs at the approaching attackers." And you say, "Okay, fine. Tell me where the wizard is positioned."

The advantage here is that rather than spending a whole session planning city defenses (which, okay, can be fun for some groups), you let the planning retroactively emerge from the events of the battle as they unfold. This makes the players feel smart and gets right to the action.

A different sort of fast-forward goes even farther, but you almost have to plan the campaign around it, and you might want to warn the players and get them on board with the idea. In this sort of campaign, you fast-forward years at a time. The PCs investigate a mystery or deal with some challenge, and afterward they live their lives until the matter arises once again or the implications of what happened earlier come to light. In fact, maybe the campaign involves multiple fast-forwards. The PCs deal with something as young people, and it returns again when they're middle-aged adults, perhaps with young families. Finally, it comes back when they're elderly.

This is fun in part because the players can help fill in the gaps of what happened in the intervening years. It's probably not important to discuss every single thing that happened offstage, and in fact perhaps it's important not to, so that some of it can arise during play. But it's a very different experience to look at a character's entire life at different important stages than it is to simply play through one part of their life where they partake in interesting stories.

SIDE SCENES WITH A SINGLE PLAYER

Sometimes, a player wants their character to do something on their own. Perhaps while the rest of the group rests or prepares for the next adventure, they want to go off and buy something on the black market. You could handle this at the table, but you realize that not only would

getting involved with a shady merchant be a great scene, but the results of that interaction could lead to even more interesting things later.

However, you don't want to focus on a single character's actions for fifteen minutes while everyone else at the table sits there, bored. So you suggest a side scene.

Side scenes are with just you and one player—perhaps two or three depending on the situation—and deal with one basic scene. You play it out between regular sessions. It's something that's too interesting to handwave away, but basic enough that you could do it over a cup of coffee together, or even via email or text. It doesn't involve a lot of die rolls or rulebooks—it's probably more of an interaction or investigation scene, not a combat or action scene.

Side scenes are useful for focusing on one character and their needs without taking away from the rest of the group. You might have to use some of the techniques above, such as a flashback, if the side scene doesn't take place perfectly between sessions. They are also of particular interest to groups using character arcs as described in Chapter 7: Character Arcs and Player Bonds (page 71) because sometimes a step in an arc doesn't involve the whole group.

ADVANCING THROUGH FOREGONE CONCLUSIONS

Of the horde of twenty kobolds, there are four left. The high-level PC fighter steps up and raises his axe. No one at the table has any doubt about what's going to happen next. The wizard isn't even going to take any more actions and instead will save their spells. The cleric is on hand in case healing will be needed, but that seems extraordinarily unlikely. In five minutes, the group can move on to the next scene.

Why wait five minutes? If the dice, stats, and rules aren't going to answer any meaningful questions, why bother with them? Fast-forward through the foregone conclusion and get on to more exciting things. The GM simply says, "You finish off the rest of your foes, clean the grim remains from your blades, and catch your breath. What do you do next?"



The rules are there to answer questions. The dice are there to inject a little randomness. But if there are no questions and the randomness is inconsequential, just narrate through the scene. The PCs set out to do something and they do it, whether it's a fight, breaking through the door, or lying to the drunk guard. The same is true if the PCs attempt something impossible. They can push and pull at the vault door as much as they want—they're not getting through it that way, so don't bother making them roll dice, add modifiers, and so forth.

CREATING TENSION

We use the word “tension” in daily life to mean bad things. Tension means we're worried about something. Tension gives us headaches and backaches. Tension in a roleplaying game, however, can be used in the same way that it's used in fiction.

RAISING THE STAKES

In fiction, a story begins with an inciting incident. That's true for most RPG stories as well, although we often use the term “adventure hook.” The inciting incident creates tension. A young boy has disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Ghosts were spotted in the old church tower. A supervillain has just robbed a bank.

So there's tension right away in the story—something's gone wrong, someone's in trouble, or something needs fixing or investigating. But you've got to keep up the pressure or that tension can fade over time.

One of the phrases you'll hear related to tension in fiction is “raising the stakes.” I mentioned stakes (and raising them) in chapter 10. To refresh, this just means that things become even more important to the characters (and the players). This can occur when their opponents pose bigger threats (the invading alien forces aren't out to destroy just the city, but the entire Earth) or more personal threats (the aliens were kidnapping random people, but now they've kidnapped a PC's sister).



The most obvious way to raise the stakes is to put the PCs in jeopardy. They track down the sinister creature that has stolen the child, but now it strikes out at them. Now they're directly in danger.

Another way to raise the stakes is with a twist. The PCs track down the missing child and learn that mysterious beings from another dimension have spirited her away not for some nefarious purpose, but because they believe only she can save them. Or perhaps the supervillain who robbed the bank was trying to go legit and has been framed. These kinds of twists knock the PCs (and the players) off-kilter a bit and force them to reassess the situation and their actions. This increases the tension.

THE UNKNOWN

Nothing is better at creating tension than that which we don't know or understand. A closed door is inherently more stressful than an open one, even if we see a terrible monster on the other side of the open doorway. Because the threat we imagine behind the closed door is always worse.

Questions are more interesting than answers. Questions intrigue. They encourage speculation and theories. They are mysteries begging to be solved, potential threats waiting to strike, and possible victories waiting to be achieved. They are the very definition of story tension.

Answers (unless they raise more questions) do the opposite. They confirm and define. They refute speculation and theories. That's not to say that you should never answer a question, but it is worth always keeping in mind that you'll get more response from a player by posing a question than by giving them background exposition. "No one knows why, but there is a mountain that hovers in the sky a mile above the ground" is always going to garner more attention than "The wizards of the land cast a spell that caused the mountain to float into the sky and remain there forever."

A question is a quest (see how the words are related?). If there's a floating mountain and no one knows why, maybe a PC can go find out.

But if everyone knows why, there's nothing to do. And doing things is the very core of stories, RPG or otherwise. An answer is the end of a quest. When we have the answer, we know the quest—the thing that needs doing—is over.

So fill your world, fill your plots, fill every session with things that are unknown. The players will feel like there's much to explore, discover, learn, conquer, or whatever else they like to do. That's the great thing about the unknown. Human nature makes the players assume that the blank spots are filled with the things they want to be there.

In other words, the unknown can lead to more headcanon. Remember headcanon? That's where a player makes up what they believe to be true in their own head, without ever knowing whether it's actually what's going on.

Don't try to suppress or forbid headcanon. It shows player interest. Sure, it might be wrong, but they'll find that out eventually. It can even lead to confusion if players begin to assume carelessly that their headcanon is truth. But this is a lesson they need to learn on their own. If they confuse what they know with what they think they know, their assumptions will get them in trouble, so they'll need to learn to take a few notes, or take better notes, about the things going on in the campaign.

Regardless of player headcanon, if you put questions in the setting or plot, you need to have answers. Or at the very least, the illusion of answers. If you put a floating mountain in your setting, you should know why it's floating, or you should at least imply that there's a reason, even if you haven't figured it out yet.

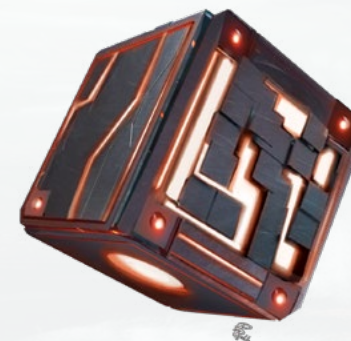
The metagaming danger is that if the players think you don't have answers for their questions, they won't ask them. They won't even assume that the questions are questions at all. You might, for example, place a clan of weird humanoids in a valley they never leave, hoping that the question posed (why don't they leave?) will intrigue the players and lead them to discover something strange about the valley. But the players might never ask that question because they might just think

that you never gave the humanoids and the valley much deep thought. That's a lousy assumption on their part, and it usually comes either from having had a bad GM in the past, or from you inadvertently teaching them that you don't always do things for a reason.

That's why the illusion of an answer is as good as an answer. Players don't need to know everything, but they need to believe that you do, or that you can come up with what's needed when it's needed.

Of course, this ties into the twists we already discussed. Because sometimes something is unknown but we think it's known. We don't think there's anything dangerous on the other side of the door, but when we open it, there's a terrible monster glaring at us hungrily. Subverting expectations is a fantastic tension-builder. As soon as the players are absolutely convinced that they understand something, it might be time to alter that thing. This can be as minor as replacing the bartender at their favorite watering hole to revealing that their trusted ally has been a shape-changing alien all along.

And sometimes, you want to make everything known to players (at least if they're paying attention) and give them no twists. Why? Three reasons. First, if the players discover the truth about a situation or a place (through reconnaissance, research, magic, or whatever), they should be rewarded. Second, if the players use that information to make a plan and it goes . . . as planned, that in and of itself is a fun and novel experience. It makes players feel smart. Last, if there's *always* a twist, they expect it. They learn not to plan, because plans never work. Sometimes the best twist is that there's no twist at all!



EVOKING EMOTION

When I was a young game master, probably about fourteen years old, I was running an adventure called *Tomb of Horrors*, a devilishly dangerous dungeon for early D&D. While we played, I was describing a dark corridor the PCs were walking down and one player turned to another (they were also fourteen-year-olds) and said, “I’m really getting scared.”

That was a big, eye-opening moment for me. I had actually evoked a real emotion out of someone with my fictional world and the mental pictures I was painting. That was really new to me, and really powerful. It’s absolutely the moment I realized that I would run games for the rest of my life.

There’s probably no greater moment for a GM than when you create situations that affect the players emotionally. I don’t mean in a weird, psychologically manipulative way, but in the way that a sad story makes someone sad or a horror story makes someone scared. We all know it’s not real, it’s just a story, but good stories bring out real emotions.

The dynamic GM who has the devious NPC suddenly betray the PCs gets the players (not just the characters, but the *players*) to react with real anger or indignation. The dynamic GM who describes the ghostly hand that suddenly brushes against a PC’s cheek gives the player momentary but literal chills. The dynamic GM who has a kindly NPC give the starving PCs their last bit of food causes the players to be legitimately touched.

What’s more, if you do this consistently, you’ll encourage the players to do the same for other players. When a heroic character sacrifices their life so that their friends can all survive, the other players are moved—it’s both a sad and a noble moment. By creating an environment where real emotions from fictional situations are not only safe, but encouraged (rather than being embarrassing), you give the players room to feel and to take actions that will evoke emotions in the others.

HOOKING PLAYERS

One advantage that a GM will always have over a game designer is direct knowledge of the players. You know, better than anyone, what motivates your players in both positive and negative ways. You know that one player will always be motivated by a need to be heroic. You know another has a bit of a squeamish fear of spiders. You can use this knowledge to spur the PCs to action and invest them further in the events of the game.

If you know that your players aren’t motivated by monetary rewards for their characters, you know not to use them. If you know that one PC has a strong relationship to a particular NPC, you can use that NPC as a great motivator to get the PC involved in a story.

Common motivators can include:

- ☞ Altruism
- ☞ Financial reward
- ☞ Revenge against a foe
- ☞ Status increase
- ☞ Power (new abilities, gear, and so on)
- ☞ Thrill of discovery
- ☞ NPC connections
- ☞ Religious or organization affiliation
- ☞ Fear

Knowing which of these (or any others you come up with) to use is one of the keys to getting the PCs enmeshed in the stories that will become the campaign. The sooner you figure this out, the quicker you’ll stop wasting time with adventure hooks that get no results. Get to know your players and why their characters do what they do.

However, you have to use this knowledge carefully. The last thing you want to do is use a fictional situation to trigger a severe negative emotional response that lies well outside the bounds of the game. In other words, if you’re going to encourage an emotional reaction, particularly a negative one, make sure that it is only within the context of the game. This means that if a player has had a real-life bad situation—

let alone actual trauma—you not only don't want to use that, you want to steer well clear of that topic in the game entirely (because emotional reactions can be triggered inadvertently too). This is all part of keeping the game table a safe space. For more on creating a safe, welcoming space, see page 27.

ENCOURAGING PROACTIVITY IN PLAYERS

The most typical, most straightforward RPG adventure is: an NPC agrees to reward the PCs for doing a challenging (and hopefully interesting) thing. And there's nothing wrong with that. Nothing. But there's so much more you can do.

The issue with that type of adventure setup is that the PCs are being reactive. They're reacting to someone else's needs or wants. They're struggling to fight someone else's battles.

And that's fine. But consider, that's not the way stories often work. In fact, one of the rules of characters in stories is that the person most affected by the events of the plot should often be the main character (or one of them). In many stories, the main character isn't an outsider asked by those affected for help. Instead, they're right there in the thick of things. The main character does things because they want to do them. It's their goal they're accomplishing, not someone else's.

Likewise, the adventure that begins with the bad guys doing something wrong (robbing a bank, kidnapping the prince, or building a planet-destroying space station), implying that the PCs need to stop them, is also entirely reactive. PCs can be self-sacrificing heroes, interested in always doing what's right, but if that means they sit around (or wander the land or the galaxy) waiting for something to happen so they can deal with it, they're being reactive. They're not trying to achieve their own goals; they're trying to stop the antagonists from achieving theirs.

If you occasionally want your stories to feel more like the stories you read or watch, you'll want proactive PCs. Proactive PCs have their own goals. Sometimes these are tied to their backstory (find the people

who murdered their parents) and sometimes they're purely aspirational (overthrow the tyrant). Sometimes they're straightforward (hoard all the magic I can find) and sometimes they're complex (find the secret crafting technique, the ingredients, and the materials to make an extra-powerful staff of fireballs). Sometimes they're selfish (get all the money I can) and sometimes they're altruistic (help the people of this community get fresh water). The important thing is, they're at least somewhat specific. A goal of "do the right thing" isn't really a goal—it's a character trait.

Using the character arcs in Chapter 7: Character Arcs and Player Bonds, page 71 will instantly increase proactivity in the players. In fact, they are based entirely around the concept of players determining their own goals and pursuing them.

OFFSTAGE SCENES

Although this idea won't work for everyone, some GMs think of their game like it's a book or a movie with an omniscient point of view. In such a story, the viewer or reader follows the actions of the main characters but also gets to see what the bad guys are up to, or sees a scene that plays out as a result of what the main characters do even though those characters are not onstage at the moment.

We'll refer to these as "offstage" scenes. Imagine, for example, a storyline in your campaign involving a dam that bursts, bringing a huge flood to a valley where the PCs are. The story might involve the PCs trying to survive this ordeal, or perhaps working to help save others trapped by the flood. But maybe this section of the campaign actually starts with a scene that the PCs themselves aren't privy to: the GM describes the events that cause the dam to burst. The GM describes alarms going off, workers trying to prevent the problem, and finally just trying to survive. It's an exciting (but ultimately bleak) scene, and it sets the tension high for the story because the players (not the PCs) see what happens and what is bringing doom to the valley.

That's a situation where the GM starts with an offstage scene. It's for mood and flavor. The players shouldn't act on this knowledge. In fact, the best sort of offstage scene might be one that provides excitement and flavor but doesn't give the players any kind of advantage. Knowing what it looked like when the dam burst isn't going to help the characters in the valley survive the sudden flooding, for example.

Other kinds of offstage scenes might offer a glimpse of what the NPC opponent is up to. The PCs have just destroyed the steampunk villain's dirigible, sending the burning wreck crashing to the ground. Was the villain on board? The characters don't know, but the GM then says, "The scene cuts to a small, cramped compartment, almost like the inside of a coffin. It's dark, but someone's moving inside. A hand pulls a lever. Suddenly, the compartment ejects out of the side of the flaming dirigible like a shell out of a cannon, just before it impacts with the earth. The coffin-like thing splashes into the sea more than a mile away. A few minutes later, an exhausted, soaking-wet figure crawls out of the surf, whispering, 'I shall return . . . for my revenge!'"

This offstage scene does indeed give the players useful information. Upon hearing it, one or more of them might want to get to the seaside and finish the villain off while he's weak. But that's not the point. Instead, the idea is to give them a tantalizing glimpse that the villain—hopefully someone the players have come to love to hate—will be back. It's a promise of more gaming fun in the same way that a similar movie ending might suggest a sequel. It's a storytelling technique.

Another thing you can do is take an offstage scene and put it onstage, even though it doesn't involve the PCs. In an adventure I wrote called *Dead Gods*, I interrupted the story in the middle and had the players all make new characters. These new characters took part in an adventure that occurred well in the past that would have an important impact on what the regular characters were doing in the present—but I didn't tell the players that. Through events in the story, the memories of these past characters became encoded in a magical item that was eventually obtained by the regular characters, who could then see what

their counterparts had encountered, and could use that knowledge. The idea here is that, rather than have a lot of exposition about what the PCs see when they find this magical memory item, the players experienced it firsthand. And because I didn't explain what was happening, the players were encouraged to play the new characters as if they were real. In the short term, they were invested in the new characters enough so that what they did really mattered, because it did. In effect, I took metagame knowledge and *used* it to advance the story. Normally, players have to work to try to forget something that happened to a former character while playing another, but in this example, remembering that information was crucial to the success of their current adventure.

TWO GAMES, ONE WORLD

If you've got so many people eager to play in games you run, you sometimes find you have to run two different games on different nights. Maybe you run *Call of Cthulhu* every other Saturday for one group and *Numenera* on Thursday evenings for another.

But what if instead you played the same game, in the same setting, with both groups? What if events in those games happened concurrently, and the actions of one group might be discovered by the other, or even affect the story of the other? And what if characters from one group could temporarily join the other group, or maybe the entirety of both groups could band together for one session to deal with a single, particularly difficult challenge?

It's tricky, but you could pull this off. And it introduces a whole new level of interactivity and dynamism. There are a few issues to consider.

TIMING

The most important issue is also the most difficult one: keeping track of the timing of everything. If one group spends three weeks researching and resting before getting back to the action, that might put them three weeks ahead of the other group, because in terms of time at the table, those three weeks happen instantly.

Keeping track of who does what, when, is vital. If the activity of Group A results in a big fire in a factory on Monday the 5th, Group B might find out about it when they come to Tuesday the 6th. Of course, they might see the smoke on the 5th and want to go investigate, but you've already played out the fire and surrounding events with Group A, and in so doing established that Group B did not show up. You've got to run interference in that case and make sure that something happens to keep Group B from getting to the burning factory.

COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION

It's best if the PCs in one group have a way to find out about (at least some of) the things that the other group does. This might be news reports, rumors, or sights on the horizon. Maybe only the major things get communicated. Or maybe the two groups communicate with each other directly through cell phones, magic spells, or whatever. This gets really tricky. If a character in Group A telephones a character in Group B, you need to take notes of when that call happens and what's said. This works best, obviously, if Group A is slightly ahead in the timeline. If not, you might have to retroactively allow the information to get conveyed and tell the Group B players later, or just tell the Group A player that Group B doesn't answer their phone.

Alternatively, you could literally have the Group A *player* phone the Group B player for real and have the Group B player play through the conversation even though it's not their normal game night.

CROSSOVERS

The reason communication between the groups makes this more fun is that they can arrange a crossover. One or more characters from one group joins the other for a time. This can really shake things up. Characters will be swapping war stories and trading information. "Well, when we went to the Valley of Blue Fire, we saw the Quivering Adept but ran from him." "Oh, really? We killed that guy."



When I had two groups in one setting, my friend Chris always played in both groups, with different characters. His characters were twin brothers and served as a way for the groups to communicate now and again, when the brothers would get together and talk. Even better, though, sometimes Chris would have the twins switch which group they would return to, and only he and I knew it—the other players didn't. A little tricky to keep track of it all, but fun.

Crossovers can solve meta issues as well. If two of the players in Group A aren't getting along, have one of them move game nights and join Group B. Or if a player in one group has a schedule change and now their chosen game night doesn't work for them (permanently or temporarily), perhaps the other game night does and they can switch groups.

TWO GMs

Co-GMing is something you can do with a like-minded friend. The two of you act as a single game master, dividing the duties and both creating the setting, the adventures, and the NPCs. It can take some of the stress off of just one GM, and it can make the whole game experience more exciting for everyone with more GM attention going to every individual player. There are a few different ways to do this.

DIVIDE UP THE DUTIES

One GM handles the description and the characters and another manages the rules. Or, one GM does the rules, the adjudication, and the description while the other runs all the NPCs. You can take the many responsibilities of a GM and divide them however you want, focusing on the strengths of each GM.

SPLIT THE PARTY

Don't divide up the duties—divide up the players. For example, one GM gives the description to the whole group. A couple of characters move over to investigate the strange golden idol while the others peer inside the chest. One GM immediately starts talking with the two by the idol, describing what they see and asking for actions. The other handles the opening of the chest and what's inside. This works best if, as I described earlier, one or both of the GMs is willing to get up and move around, approaching one or two players.

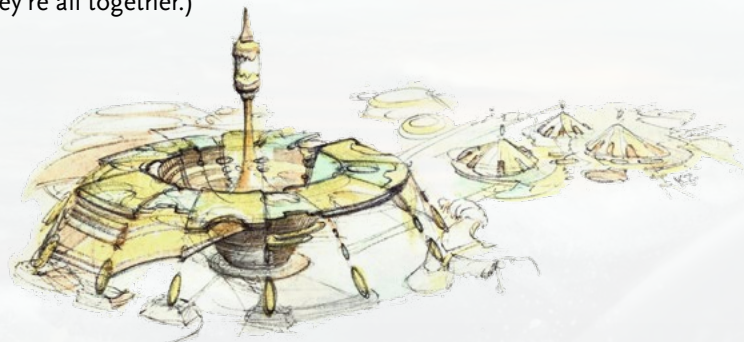
Every few minutes, the GMs take a few moments to communicate, coordinate, and make sure that each knows the entirety of what's going on. But as long as they both prepare good notes ahead of time, and take decent notes during play, it's all pretty easily manageable.

Two GMs, no waiting!

REALLY SPLIT THE PARTY

You can also literally have a portion of the group leave and go to an entirely different location, basically taking one GM with them. In this scenario, those leaving and their GM can go to a different room or another spot away from the other players. Then, at some point, they can return, and the two GMs can confer about what happened—and so can the players, but they'll do it in character.

If you do this frequently, you can allow yourself to take on a larger group of players than normal, knowing that much of the time, the group will be in smaller, easier-to-manage subgroups. (In general, though, having co-GMs will make it easier to handle larger groups, even when they're all together.)



With Our Co-GM Powers Combined

by Darcy L. Ross

I'm a huge advocate for having two game masters run a game together. Co-GMing shares the cognitive load, imbues my narratives with fresh ideas, and unveils the secrets of how others approach game mastery.

How does one smoothly pass the narrative torch without spending valuable game time negotiating the GM role? Here are my co-GMing tips:

PRE-SESSION PREP

If you have time, meet with your co-GM (perhaps over geeky beverages). Sketch out the general shape of the upcoming session, its key details, and the roles you'll both play.

Key details here are components of the session that you share narrative control over—perhaps the dimensions of a battle set piece, or the clues and underlying truth of a mystery. Essentially, they include anything the players might ask *both* of you about, and where inconsistency would cause significant confusion: is it a castle over that hill, or a huge obelisk floating over a lagoon? The key details you need to prepare depend on your division of GM roles.

Experiment with different co-GM configurations! My domains of GM control vary with each co-GM and session. Sometimes we assign the portrayal of specific NPCs, and other times we assign a lead GM to scenes and locations. When my partner has a brilliant vision for a session, I love to take on a purely support role. With this dynamism, you can learn and play to your strengths, and practice your weaknesses within a co-GM safety net.

DURING GAMEPLAY

Once a game session begins, I rely on a hidden space where I can share information with my co-GM (often scratch paper behind a GM screen), occasional breaks to recalibrate verbally, and my trusty co-GM notecard.

CO-GM NOTECARD

My best tool for co-GMing is a notecard contraption used to communicate and pass the role of lead GM back and forth—a sort of GM cue card or stoplight.

Fold a notecard into thirds to create a triangular prism, and write on each rectangular face:

- ☺ “Help!” – I am requesting my co-GM to step in.
- ☹ “I’m going somewhere with this . . .” – I’m working toward a goal and don’t want to relinquish narrative control yet.
- ☺ “Jump in anytime!” – I’m comfortable leading, but am open to the co-GM taking over if they have a great idea.

Either co-GM flips the notecard to signal one of these three cues, and the other can acquiesce with a nod or by sliding the tool over to the new lead GM.

You’ll discover your own co-GM communication needs and tools, but feel free to start by trying the notecard idea.

AFTERMATH: APPRECIATE, COMMUNICATE, AND ITERATE

After each session, each co-GM should reflect on the experience. Tell your co-GM where the dynamic felt smooth and where you appreciated their contributions. Next, identify moments or issues that could have gone better. (This feedback technique is called “Roses and Thorns.”) Discuss how you might operate differently next time, and brainstorm tools or techniques to address the sticking points.

Co-GMing is a skill to build like any other, so you’ll get better with practice!

LEARNING FROM YOUR MISTAKES

We all make mistakes. Don't get upset or worried about them. But do learn from them.

GET FEEDBACK

As I've written many times earlier in this book, encourage the players to give feedback to the GM. Players should always feel free to tell the GM what they loved and what they didn't love. This is the best way for a GM to grow and get even better, and it ensures that everyone is playing the game they want to be playing.

HINDSIGHT

Look back at what you've done. Take time to mull over what happened in a session once it's over. If something didn't turn out the way you'd envisioned it, ask yourself why. If the players weren't motivated by what you'd hoped, weren't moved by what you'd hoped, or weren't interested in what you'd hoped, examine why that was.

As the GM, when it comes to the flow of information, the genesis of most actions, and the overall tone of the whole game, the proverbial buck stops here. Players can make mistakes too, obviously, so when you look back and see something you don't like, first decide if it's something you could have done differently. If it is, think about what you might have done, and then—as a mental exercise—roleplay what might have happened if you had. If you had hoped the PCs would befriend the alien but instead they thought she was a monster and blasted her, consider what the players would have done if you'd made her say something different or offered them a gesture of goodwill. You know the players in your group. You can guess what they would do or say. (And if you can't, this kind of mental exercise will help you learn how.)

Don't worry about the past. Keep moving ahead, but if you think you should have done something different before, be sure you do it next time.

RECORD YOUR SESSIONS

This can be a bit painful for some of us, but—with your players' permission—make an audio recording of a game session or two. Play them back and listen to how you speak. How you give description. How you handled the rules or an NPC's dialog. If you can get a sense of how you come across to the players, you can learn from it. You can focus on the things you like and want to keep doing as well as the things you'd like to change.

You can even pay attention to the time while you listen and keep notes. How much time overall was spent in the session talking about things unrelated to the game? Too much? Is there anything you could do to improve that? How much time was spent referencing or discussing the rules? Again, too much? Just right?

You make the call, but you can't do it without the data, and the recording's not going to lie to you.

If you're feeling really ambitious (again, if you have everyone's permission) make a video recording so you can see yourself and the expressions and gestures you use. Maybe there are things you can do to become more dynamic or entertaining. Maybe you'll be pleasantly surprised by what you see. In any event, again, you'll have the recording, and the guesswork will be taken out of the equation.





PART 4: GETTING THE MOST OUT OF RPGs



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CHAPTER 14: THE GAME GROUP

You've got a game system and a game group. The GM is ready with a setting, some adventures, and some interesting NPCs. The players all have cool characters ready for a challenge. That might seem like all you need. And maybe it is. But I want to explore some of the finer points of roleplaying games to talk about how to truly have your best game ever.

GROUP SIZE

What's the right group size? This frequently asked question has an easy answer: whatever's fun for you. But, of course, that's an answer that needs further explanation.

The first thing to consider is the number of people you have available that you want in your group. If you have three close gamer friends and you love playing with them, then your group size should be four (counting you). This number helps determine the kinds of games you play. In a group that size, for example, something with some interpersonal interactions would work well, or something in the horror genre. On the other end of the spectrum, you can also probably handle something with complexity that might end up having longer player turns.

Conversely, if the number of people you want involved is seven, that's a much taller order. You probably want a game that's a little lighter on the rules so each player's turn doesn't take too long (or else one encounter will take you all night). A game with lots of emotion and back-and-forth interactions will be harder with so many players as well.

Does that mean smaller groups are always better? No. Larger groups allow for more voices, more diversity, and more points of view, and all of those things are good, particularly in a creative endeavor like an RPG. Handling player absences in a large group is much easier as well. If you've got a large group, one or even two players having to miss a session won't necessarily keep the rest of you from playing. If your

group is small, even one absent player might be a significant reduction of the whole group. It might not be possible to play without them. (Of course, more players will mean more absences, so a large group needs a policy on how to handle them—see 188 for more information on that.)

If you want an experience that involves fewer players but you've got a large group, you'll have some challenges because you'll have to winnow it down to size. Maybe split the group into two groups, even just for a short while. If there is a GM for each of the two smaller groups, and the space for both of them, you can still all meet in the same place at the same time, so it's still a communal experience. If there aren't two GMs or there isn't enough room, you'll probably have to meet at different times.

What's more common, however, is that a smaller group will want an additional player or two. Playing with two players and a GM is fun, but it might be even more fun—at least some of the time—to add at least one player into that mix. You can find a new player in the same way that a single player can find a game group; see page 9 for information on that topic.

SCHEDULING

Unless you only run one-shot games, you need to have the same group of people (more or less) show up together on a fairly regular basis to have an RPG campaign. Scheduling for that is often challenging, to say the least. School, work, family—these things and more keep us from having every Thursday night free (or whatever your game night is), or at least make it more difficult.

Most people play in the evenings, but some find that a weekend afternoon works better for them. Some even play early on a weekend morning (although that sounds horrendous to me personally!). The point is, whatever schedule works best for your group is the right one. You just have to put all your heads together and figure out what that time should be.

Everyone's instinct seems to be to let the person with the most complex schedule determine when you play. In other words, even though everyone but Kate can get together most every Thursday, you only play once a month because that's all her busy schedule will allow. Maybe you should reconsider the situation. Maybe one Thursday a month you play a Shadowrun game with Kate as part of the group, but the other Thursdays of the month you play D&D without her.

But, you say, you really like gaming with Kate. Okay, then you need to make a choice. Is gaming with Kate so great that it's worth everyone playing less often? (The answer might be yes—maybe she's really great.) If not, compromises can be made. In fact, you might end up dividing your game group into two groups, with one subset gaming on Thursday evenings and the other playing every other Saturday afternoon, for example. You can play different games with different GMs, different games with the same GM, the same game with different GMs, or whatever works. The people with the most open schedules can be part of both games.

In other words, do whatever works. You just have to be open-minded and flexible. And understanding.

FINDING THE TIME

There are many things that keep us from gaming, but the most common complaints are not having the time or not being able to find a time when everyone can get together. This is mostly a problem for adult roleplayers with jobs, kids, and so on. (Kids, you may think you're busy, but the truth is, you'll never have as much time to play RPGs as when you're in junior high or high school. Make the most of it!)

When juggling all the various aspects of life, something like playing RPGs seems like one of the easiest things to drop from your schedule. But if you really enjoy playing, it's a shame to leave it behind completely.

The solution? Break down the problem into more specific issues. Almost anyone can afford to devote three or four hours every other week to do something, but there are other factors at work too, of course. Is it

the drive time to get to the game? Play online, reducing the commute to zero. Is it that there's no reliable sitter for your kids? Again, play the game online and stay home with the kids yourself. (For more on online gaming, see Chapter 16: Playing Games Online, page 212).

Is it an inability to be available on a regular schedule? Instead of meeting every Tuesday at 6 o'clock, do a floating game night instead. You agree to get together about twice a month, but the exact days are variable. At the beginning of every month, you discuss (maybe via text or email) everyone's availability and find a couple of promising evenings or afternoons when everyone can add it to their schedule. If you want to make this process even easier, there are apps and websites that aid in group scheduling, where everyone puts in the dates and times that are good for them, and all the schedules get compared.

Notice that I said three or four hours every other week. That's probably key. Teenagers can find a lot more time to play—six- or eight-hour sessions every Friday night, maybe—but when you're older, forget that. Roleplaying games don't require that kind of time outlay to participate, and don't require a long-term commitment, either. One-shot games or short campaigns might be the way to go if you're in that situation and scheduling is difficult.

When I was a designer working on Dungeons & Dragons 3rd Edition in the late 1990s, Wizards of the Coast conducted the industry's first (and, as far as I know, last) comprehensive market research study on the needs and habits of people who play RPGs. Using this data, we determined that D&D's biggest competitor wasn't other RPGs, and it wasn't even video games or similar pastimes. It was just real life. Jobs, school, dating, and family were the major factors that kept people from playing and, in many cases, caused them to eventually give up on RPGs altogether. "I just don't have time" is still today the loudest and most common lament of gamers.

START TIME

Obviously, you've got to pick a start time when everyone's available. There is no magic time. Ideally, it's a time that isn't onerous for any one person, so they're not rushing from work, after a long commute, having skipped dinner. That's a problem because eventually that person is likely to be late frequently, and even if they make it on time, their frantic last-minute arrival will be disruptive and stressful for everyone else.

Start the session at a given time, but have everyone arrive twenty or thirty minutes earlier. Roleplaying games are a social activity, but they take place in a fictional world. Your group of friends is probably going to want to chat about their real lives, current events, or what have you for a while. If you don't make this time for beginning chitchat, players—being human—are going to do it anyway, either delaying the start of the game or, worse, bringing up these topics during the game and interrupting the flow.

Plus, everyone needs a bit of time to get settled, get a drink, use the restroom, unwind from the day, and so on before the game can start.

SESSION LENGTH

How long should your session be? The range goes from about an hour to . . . ten? Twelve? More? It really depends on your group, your availability, and your stamina. The average is probably about four hours or slightly less.

When considering how long your session should be, first ask yourselves how long it takes for your group to get something meaningful accomplished. This counts the time it takes for everyone to get settled at the beginning, time for breaks or interruptions, and so on. That's the minimum session length you should have, most likely.

Now ask yourselves, what's the longest you can reasonably expect everyone to be able to stay, taking into account real-world obligations, travel times and requirements, sleep, and simply how long people are willing to sit and talk and roll dice? Pay particular attention to how long your GM can keep it up. They very likely have the most taxing role at the table. This is your maximum session length.

Obviously, then, schedule a session that falls between the minimum and maximum lengths.

Not every session needs to be the same length. And, in fact, every once in a while, you can schedule a special session. Maybe it's a bit longer than normal because it's the big finale of an important aspect of the story. Maybe you want to include dinner in a session and ask everyone to come a little early to incorporate that. Or maybe, for fun, schedule a special marathon session that is significantly longer than normal. Maybe have a prize for the player who can stick it out the longest.

Unless your session is very short (less than two hours), plan for a break at a predetermined time. That way, rather than there always being a player out of the room getting a drink or using the restroom, everyone can take care of those needs at once and the game won't be interrupted as often. Plus, the GM could probably use the break. It's also a good excuse to limit talk at the table about non-game-related stuff, because people can chat about whatever they want during the break. Ten or fifteen minutes might be the right length for this break, but it's up to the group.

PLAYER ABSENCES

Just as with school, work, or other commitments, sometimes people can't make it to the game. Illness or schedule conflicts are the most common reasons. Don't let this get you down, and don't hold it against a player with a valid reason for not being able to make it. It's just part of life.

As a group, you'll have to make decisions about the session for everyone else who *can* make it. If one person is absent, do you still play? What becomes of their character?

Here's an easy rule of thumb: if you have six people in the group (five players and the GM) and two or more will be absent, you cancel the session. However, if only one person can't show, you still play. The absent character becomes an NPC handled by the GM. They probably have a very small role in the action, but the group doesn't suffer from the absence (crucial if the PC in question has a vital ability or talent), and you don't have to come up with a story reason for why that character

Creating Communities

by Ajit George

Roleplaying is fundamentally a social pastime. Choosing to play a tabletop RPG instead of a video game or a more impersonal leisure activity is a choice to spend time socially with other people. That social aspect can be as important, or even more important, than the expected trappings of RPGs—leveling up, killing monsters, attaining a new cybernetic implant, piloting the fastest ship in the galaxy, and so on. In fact, the real story may lie in the complex relationships between the characters, with the GM acting primarily as a facilitator to move those relationships forward, apply pressure to them, or otherwise stimulate them through the use of NPCs, plot hooks, and external events.

How do you tell great stories that are focused on the interactions between characters? Some RPGs are set up that way intentionally through the game's systems of character, resolution, and reward. But a lot of great games don't necessarily prioritize this style of play through their mechanics. Don't worry—there are still plenty of ways to do it yourself! And the easiest way is to set it up at the start.

Here are a couple of examples:

Families: Some of the most compelling novels, movies, and TV series are family dramas. The family may be dealing with all sorts of external issues, but the story is really about the interactions between family members. *The Godfather*, *Dune*, or *Game of Thrones* are good examples. The individuals in these stories all have their own goals, agendas, dreams, and ambitions, but they're tied to each other by

robust and complex relationships of blood or marriage. Start the group off as family members and work together to develop intricate and engaging relationships. Where do the interfamily loyalties lie? Who harbors bitter resentment? What secrets do they, and only they, share? Set it up right and the GM's external plots and challenges can test these familial strengths and expose the weaknesses, providing hours of great roleplaying with high drama and riveting stakes.

Love and Sex: This is always a favorite! Who is in love with who? Who wants to hook up with who? Who has *already* hooked up with who, and how do they feel about it? As long as all of the players at the table agree in advance to explore these themes, this can be the most engaging and intense way of exploring relationships between characters. The organic, emergent nature of roleplaying all but guarantees these relationships will change over time: characters fall in and out of love; sometimes sex is good, and sometimes it's very bad; intimacy often leads to misunderstandings; and no one stands to disappoint you worse than the person you care about most. It may not seem like it, but the GM's job doesn't have to change much at all—all of this can happen while the characters face down a warlord intent on conquering their homeland, or pilot a colony ship toward Alpha Centauri to save the human race.

We all sit down at the game table to tell stories together. Develop and lean into the complex relationships between characters, and you'll discover a new dimension to your roleplaying.

is missing. If you have more or fewer than six people involved, you can keep the same idea and just use one third of the total participants.

If you want to go more in depth and you hate the idea of running someone else's character, set up a story reason for player absences.

Here are some examples:

- ❖ The PC got an urgent message from home and had to return.
- ❖ The PC returned to care for and guard the horses.
- ❖ The PC needed to stay home and study a new spell or research an important bit of lore.
- ❖ The PC came down with an illness, or an injury sustained last time turned out to be worse than initially believed, and they needed to rest.
- ❖ The PC needed to remain behind to repair a piece of damaged equipment.



If you use a story reason for the absence, the group should make it part of the story. Make the important bit of lore they researched truly important. Make that piece of damaged equipment vital later. Have that message from home lead to a whole new adventure.

Here's what you shouldn't do: don't have the PC mysteriously disappear or be kidnapped by the bad guys. If you do, at least some players will want to spend the session trying to find them. Also, it will come across as though the group is punishing the player for the absence.

If you really want to take it to the next level, you can work up an ongoing story reason to explain all player absences. A few examples:

- ❖ In the Invisible Sun surrealistic fantasy RPG, an absent player has their character "pulled back into Shadow," which is a metaphysical illusory prison that all characters once inhabited but escaped, and now they must escape again.
- ❖ The PCs are all cursed, and they randomly teleport away and back again from time to time. All the PCs know it and accept it.
- ❖ The PCs are part of a pact and must allow themselves to be summoned from time to time by sorcerers who compel them to perform some task. (The PCs get something in exchange—perhaps it is the story reason for their supernatural abilities.)
- ❖ The entire campaign happens in or near the town where the PCs live, so an absent PC is just at home. This works best if most sessions end at a point where all the PCs go home.
- ❖ An alien psychic entity (an NPC run by the GM) occasionally likes to take over the body of one of the PCs. This explains why they act differently when the GM controls the absent player's character.

If you do this more elaborate story conceit well, you can conceivably have a no-cancellation rule, meaning that even if only one player in the group can show up, the session can continue, because there's a reason for it. Sometimes this actually makes the session more interesting rather than a little dissatisfying.

A lot of this assumes that the absent player gives you some advance warning. But sometimes people will cancel at the last minute, or just forget. Be ready with a backup plan should this happen. It's terrible to have four out of the five players show up ready to go only to find out that the fifth isn't coming at all. If your standing rule is that you still play, you're covered. If your standing rule is that you all play a board game or a one-shot of a different game instead, that's fine too. Just don't set yourself up to allow someone to leave you all hanging.

SPECIAL EVENT GAMES

Game session schedules can be tied to special events in different ways.

Holidays: Maybe your whole group has New Year's Day free (there's usually not much going on that day other than sports on television, even though many people have it off from school and work). Why not make it a tradition to have a special session on that day? Maybe even make it a longer-than-normal session with some kind of special in-game event.

Perhaps for a game session that falls on or near Halloween, you can have a special spooky session—a one-shot horror game, or a horror-themed session of your regular, non-horror campaign. Maybe a session near Valentine's Day involves a romance subplot. Maybe a session near Christmas involves a strange old man who travels around the world doing good deeds, or gift giving (we'll examine that latter idea in more depth later).

The point is, rather than letting special days prevent you from gaming, embrace them in some way.

Birthdays: It's nice to make some kind of special event out of a game session that falls on or near a player's birthday. You can have a treat like a cake, of course. You can also give that player a special in-game bonus (a free reroll of a bad roll that night, or something like that). It's just a nice way to tie the game to something real and fun.

Other Special Events: I have been to multiple bachelor parties that were actually game sessions because the groom-to-be was an avid gamer. I know couples who met in a game that celebrate their

anniversary with a special gaming session each year. One of my old gaming groups gets together about once every two years for a reunion that always involves a game session. A roleplaying game is such a great way to get together and enjoy the company of people you hold dear that you should find ways to use that to your advantage.

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN SESSIONS

You'll need a way for all the people in the group to communicate between sessions. The most important part of this is scheduling. You need to figure out and communicate when the next session will be, and if someone's going to be absent, they need a way to let everyone know.

What's the best way to organize your group communication? Technology is your friend. A group text isn't a terrible idea to start. Alternatively, you could create your own private group on a social media platform or some other online location devoted to chatting. Email is okay, but it can be a bit confusing without a central hub (an email mailing list is better). Trying to organize it all by phone can be chaotic, and hoping to gather everyone through happenstance (hoping Phil remembers to tell Beth that the game is on Friday, and so on) is a recipe for disaster.

You could also set aside the time at the end of every session to plan for the next. This is particularly helpful if you don't play on a regular schedule. But you'll still need a way to communicate between sessions, because things will always come up related to organizing your group.

Don't assume that everyone knows when the game is, even if it's every Friday at 8 without fail. Someone in the group should still send out a reminder to everyone. This is a good moment to strike up a discussion as well. As in, "Game Friday night at 8 o'clock, as always. We were going to try to get down to the lower levels below the castle and see if the amulet was there, right? Anyone have any ideas on how best to do that?" It's immensely efficient and useful for the players to talk about plans for the next session in advance. It saves time at the beginning of the session and allows you to get right to the action.

If you have long gaps between sessions, such discussions are both more difficult and more vital. Everyone will have forgotten a few things that happened and could use a refresher. Again, if you have to spend time at the beginning of the session to do that, it leaves less time to play.

Group notes that everyone has access to help in this regard. Someone could be in charge of keeping group notes, or you could rotate, with everyone taking a turn. This doesn't have to be homework. Notes don't have to be pages and pages—just a few points marking the highlights of the session. You could use these notes as a refresher for everyone, distributing them right before the next session.

Alternatively, the GM could write up a refresher and send it out to everyone. The GM has insight into what's important and what's not, so this is a way to make sure the players are on the right track. The GM can also use this write-up to establish (or re-establish) the right mood. A light-hearted game might have a light-hearted refresher, while an intense cliffhanger of a session would have a dramatic one.

WHO SHOULD BE THE GM?

It turns out that in many groups, there's one person who really enjoys creating worlds or adventures or is particularly skilled at running games. It just sort of works out that that person is the GM, whether the group has one long-running campaign or frequently plays different games.

But in other groups, it's not quite so easy.

NO ONE WANTS TO GM

Sometimes, you get a group of people together who want to participate in a roleplaying game, but no one wants to run it. No one has the time, everyone claims. Or no one really enjoys it.

There *are* a few roleplaying games that don't require GMs, but they are few and face a lot of limitations.

A good option is to just take turns. Look at it as a necessary evil if you must, but if one person runs a three-session game here, another

runs a five-session game there, and so on, you'll get a lot of gaming in and no one will have to GM too much. If time is a real issue, use published adventures and settings so GM prep is nothing more than reading a bit.

Also, consider trying to find a new player who likes to GM and would like to join your group. Talk to the people at your local game store or at a game convention. Pleas of "players seeking a GM" could net you not only a game master, but a great new addition to the group.

But I need to add (I'm sorry, but I really do), look for the fun and creativity in being a game master. If you can find the joy in being the one to create the stuff "behind the curtain," you'll discover that it can be so much fun, and so rewarding, that you want to keep doing it.

EVERYONE WANTS TO GM

Probably more common than no one wanting to GM is multiple people wanting to do it. One person really wants to try out a brand-new science fiction game they just bought, and another has a great idea for a superhero campaign, but you're still deep in the middle of a long-running fantasy game run by yet another person. What do you do?

Well, first off, recognize that this isn't really a problem, but a boon. You've got a lot of great gaming ahead of you. You can create a "wait list" with everyone in the group weighing in on what order to play the games in, and then schedule it out. The GM says the fantasy game will probably go until March, so the group agrees to play the relatively short superhero campaign next, and after that they'll turn to the sci fi campaign. Whatever the schedule, everyone knows they're going to get their shot at being in the GM seat.

Some groups handle it in a different way and rotate the GM spot session by session. So it's fantasy this week, but when the group gets together in two weeks, it will be the new sci fi game, and so on. (This solution can also apply to the group where no one is eager to be the game master, because time spent GMing is never consecutive, and that might appeal.)

And there's a happy middle ground too. If your group has a regular GM, but one or two players would be interested in *occasionally* running a game, maybe they can run games now and again to get the chance while giving the regular GM a break.

TABLE RULES

Many groups develop table rules, and it's probably a good idea. Table rules are different from house rules. They don't really have anything to do with the game as it's played, but instead with how people operate at the table. Rules about die rolling, player attendance, and so on. Mostly, they answer questions before they're asked, heading off confusion or disagreements.

You should have answers for the following questions:

- ☹ How many people have to be unable to show up before the game is cancelled?
- ☹ Does everyone need to roll their dice out in the open?
- ☹ What happens if a die rolls off the table? Do you look at the result on the floor, or do you reroll?
- ☹ What happens if a die lands cocked at an angle and you're not sure which result to use?
- ☹ What happens if someone rolls a die, but before the result is confirmed, someone bumps the table and the die result changes?
- ☹ How much table talk is allowed? In this instance, table talk is out-of-character advice from one or more players to the player whose turn it is during the game, probably in the middle of what should be a fast-moving action scene.
- ☹ Are players required to remember details? For example, if the PCs meet the bartender and his name is Dick, and they return many sessions later, do they remember the bartender's name even if the players do not? Does the GM jog their memories?

- ☹ How much out-of-character knowledge is a player allowed to use, if any? For example, if one character enters a room full of snakes, can a character who is still out in the hallway prepare their serpent-slaying spell, based on the fact that the player heard the GM tell the other player about the snakes?

Here are some other less-common table rules that I've encountered. Some of them are fun, but certainly not for everyone:

- ☹ The GM never pays for pizza (or whatever food the group shares).
- ☹ Everyone takes a turn bringing food or a beverage to a session that is somehow related to the game or their character.
- ☹ No player is allowed to speak unless they're describing their action or speaking in character.
- ☹ If your character leaves the group (to scout ahead or something), you have to get up from the game table.
- ☹ Important items (magic items and the like) are written on index cards, so that everyone always knows immediately who is holding what because whomever has the card has the object.
- ☹ If a player wants their character to take an action that the other characters cannot see, the player writes it on a note and gives it to the GM (or texts them).



REWARDS

Almost every game offers rewards that allow a player to advance or improve their character, either through new skills or abilities (gaining levels, getting more character points, and so on) or through accumulation of wealth or new gear (money that can be spent on new things, magic items found as treasure, and so on). In fact, many games offer some form of both.

There are two issues to consider with this: character advancement and treasure. One focuses more on the GM and one on the players, but they're both group issues.

CHARACTER ADVANCEMENT

First, how important is it for the group to advance or improve in lockstep? This might seem like a game balance issue, and to some extent it is, but there are other considerations here. For ease, let's use the term "experience points" here as shorthand, even if not every game uses that concept.

Most games handle experience points as an individual character issue. That is, characters earn points as individuals. One character might earn more than another based on certain accomplishments or uses of their abilities. Some GMs hand out bonus points for roleplaying or other behavior they want to reward.

However, most groups play with the assumption that all characters advance together. It's either too cumbersome to keep track of individual awards or it seems unfair and no fun when one character advances and another does not. Or both. Often, a GM will handwave the whole thing and state at an appropriate time that the whole group gets a certain number of experience points (or, if applicable, the even more straightforward "Everyone gains a level").

This seems fair and fun to a lot of people, but before you decide to do it that way, consider this: if a player shows up every other session, and thus their character participates in only half the group's activities, should that character advance with all the others? Is that fair? Is it fun? Conversely, if the GM hands out bonus experience points to "good

roleplayers," is that penalizing the more introverted players in the group? You're free to answer however you wish, but make sure your group is all on the same page when it comes to these issues.

I suppose it suggests that one should ask what "experience points" really represent. Are they trying to model the idea that experiences in the game are learning opportunities, and that by doing things, you learn to get better at those things? Or are they just a game mechanic that allows players to improve their characters over time because doing so is fun and satisfying? Again, neither answer is right or wrong, but it's worth asking your group how they feel about it.

TREASURE

The second issue to consider when it comes to rewards is how to divide up physical rewards. Again, for shorthand, we'll use the word "treasure," although in your game treasure might be magic, alien artifacts, survival gear, or just cold hard cash.

I've personally watched groups of hard-core conservative capitalists turn into absolute socialists when they divide up treasure, and I'm sure they'd be horrified to have someone point out that their plan to "give each bit of treasure to the character who can make best use of it" is awfully close to Karl Marx's statement, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

And yet, political jokes aside, it's not a terrible way to divide treasure. It probably is best for the whole group if the wizard gets all the good wizard-focused things and the warrior gets the cool new sword and shield.

But here are the pitfalls:

- ☹️ If you're not careful, one character can end up with a lot more than the others.
- ☹️ This system rewards persuasive smooth talkers. A player who can convince the others that their character can make best use of the cool new treasure every time will end up with the lion's share, while a quieter, more reserved, or less eloquent player will end up with less.

For what it's worth, there are other methods you can consider:

Determine randomly. You know—roll dice. There are a couple of different ways to do this. One way is to divide up everything that can be divided equally (like coins), and then everyone rolls dice. In order of who rolled highest, everyone gets to pick something that can't be divided up (like a magic item). Alternatively, divvy up everything the way that seems to make everyone happy, and if there is contention over an item, everyone who wants it rolls for it.

Sell it all and hand out the cash. Cash is easy to divide up, but gear and special items are not. If you sell everything, you know everyone will get a fair share of the money earned. Instead of selling everything to NPCs, you can even allow a PC to buy an item from the group, if they have the cash and a fair price can be reached, so a cool item can be retained.

THE PARTY FUND

When dividing up treasure—particularly monetary rewards—some groups will create a special fund put aside for expenses that aid the entire group. The idea is that everyone's individual cash is spent at their own discretion on things for themselves, but if the whole group needs to rent an SUV for their mission, the cost comes out of this special fund. Lots of groups call this a “party fund,” as in “money for the whole party.”

It's not a requirement. Plenty of groups handle money in different ways. But if you want to set up a party fund, there are two good ways to do it:

1. The party fund gets the leftovers. Every time the group divides up treasure, any amount that doesn't divide equally, or any item that is unclaimed by a character, goes into the party fund (valuable items are usually converted to cash unless they're kept for barter).
2. The party fund gets an equal share. When the group divides treasure, they figure out the split as though there were one additional character, and that extra share goes into the party fund.



PLAYERS JOINING OR LEAVING

Like the stories they emulate, roleplaying game campaigns sometimes have a fluid cast. New characters come in, and others leave. In an RPG, however, this is often driven by the group of players. (Although see page 228 for thoughts on handling character death). Players come and unfortunately also go, and the group needs to work this out in regard to the group dynamic as well as the story being told.

THE BRAND-NEW PLAYER

Your group invites someone to join in the game and they've never played an RPG before. Incorporating a newbie into your group brings special responsibilities, but it's always worth it.

Before you invite the new player, of course, consider whether they will be a good fit with the group and whether RPGs will be something they enjoy.

Probably the best way to ascertain if the potential new player will fit into the group is whether they're already friends with at least one of the existing players. Otherwise, it's like introducing anyone new into an existing group of friends. Do their interests match? Do their personalities match? If the group likes bawdy humor and the new player is a bit on the sensitive side, that might not be the best fit. If the group enjoys complex rules minutiae and in-depth tactics, a casual player who is not at all math-focused might not be a good addition.

Figuring out if someone will like RPGs is harder. People will surprise you—someone you'd never think would enjoy them will really take to it, and someone you think is a natural just won't make the leap. When in doubt, give anyone you think you'd enjoy spending time with a chance to see for themselves if they like it.

It helps if they're a fan of the genre that you're playing. If you know that Sarah is a huge Tolkien fan, she might really like your D&D game. The genre is often the bridge to get the new player to where they need to be. "Oh, you like Star Trek? What if you could play a game where you get to be someone serving on the bridge of a starship?"

MAKING THE BEST POSSIBLE FIRST IMPRESSION

First off, even if you're in the middle of a long-term campaign, consider starting with a one-shot game in which everyone (including the new player, obviously) starts with new characters. Starting out is already intimidating, but the responsibility of joining in a story that a group of strangers has been building for a considerable amount of time adds a lot more on their shoulders. It's easier to start out if it feels a little like everyone else is starting out too.

In fact, if you're going to have a special one-shot game to introduce the new person, consider bringing in two or even three newbies. Again, it's easier when you're not the only person who doesn't know what's going on. Plus, while you'd never tell them this, the whole experience could be seen as a sort of tryout, like actors auditioning for a role. If one of the new players is obnoxious or just doesn't like the game, but the other seems great, later you can privately invite the one who fits in to join your regular game.

Whether it's a campaign or a one-shot, try really hard not to overburden the new player with a lot of rules. They only need to know the basics. You can tell them how to make a skill check to climb a rope if and when it comes up. Focus on the rules that pertain specifically to their character. Tell them briefly what their stats mean and what special abilities they have. Feel free to answer a lot of their questions about other things with "We can cover that later."

Rather than the rules, hook them into the story, because story is something we all can latch onto. It's built right into being a person. Give them a goal, and tell them how their character might possibly achieve that goal. If the PCs are exploring an abandoned military complex to find evidence of strange experiments that might have occurred there and the newbie's character is a tough private eye, explain that they have a sharp eye when it comes to searching, and if trouble gets stirred up, they know how to handle themselves in a fight.

Don't expect too much from the new player (but don't condescend to them, either). It might take a bit for them to get a handle on the most

basic RPG premises, and they might need or want to see the other, experienced players take some actions first. You'll almost certainly see that the new player sort of agrees with whatever is presented to them at first. This is because they have no context for making the decisions you're asking them to make. Don't let them get frustrated if you can help it. If you ask questions like "What do you do?" or "What spell do you want to cast?" and they answer "I don't know," that's okay. It's to be expected. Give them two options with very short, concise explanations. If they still can't make a decision, suggest one, but explain why it's a good choice. "You probably want to cast a shield spell to protect yourself from harm so you can be safe."

Resist the urge to have the newbie play an NPC or someone's old PC that isn't being used anymore. It's hard enough to learn the rules and



take in all the concepts of an RPG without also being told "Oh, Alethia the Cleric wouldn't do that." If you want to enthrall someone with the concept of roleplaying, use the "you can do anything" approach, which means the new player makes all the decisions for their character.

Last, remember that it's not solely the GM's job to teach a new player the rules. It's the job of the whole group. But don't everyone talk at once, and let me reiterate a statement from just above—don't overwhelm the newbie. I have seen more people turned off from RPGs by feeling like they're in over their head or by utter confusion than anything else.

TEACHING THE RULES

In addition to starting slowly and focusing more on story, here are a few other tips when teaching someone game rules:

- ☞ There's an adage that a person needs to hear something seven times before they will remember it. While this isn't always true, it's more true with topics that have lots of seemingly unstructured ideas, which is precisely what an RPG will feel like to a newcomer.
- ☞ Try hard to remember what it was like when you were first learning. Remember what intrigued you enough to learn the rules, and use that to teach.
- ☞ It's easier to learn as you go, with actual situations at hand. So rather than explain how combat works up front, wait until a combat comes up in the game and then explain.
- ☞ Create connections. Link mechanics that are similar together, and relate back to them. This will make it clear that every rule isn't random or idiosyncratic (unless you're playing a game where that's true, I suppose). "Okay, so now you need to roll for initiative. This works just like rolling to see if you succeed at a skill, except you need to beat what the GM rolls for the NPC."
- ☞ Examples are almost always better than rules. But keep the examples simple.

NEW TO THE GROUP

The new addition to the group isn't necessarily new to roleplaying. Maybe they just moved to the area, or maybe they left their former group. Maybe you didn't realize that the cool guy in the office also played RPGs until now, and you invited him to join. Regardless of the reason, you've got to incorporate a new player into your existing group, and probably into a campaign that's already underway.

If you're starting a new campaign or one-shot with a person new to the group, you don't have to do anything special with their character. Just treat them like everyone else. However, you'll have to take steps to make the new player feel welcome. Remember, you've already got a tight-knit group with lots of shared experiences, and it's hard to be the newcomer in that situation. You want them to lose their "outsider" status as quickly as possible so they feel welcome.

Go out of your way to offer the new player beverages or snacks. Everyone else might feel free to grab stuff from the kitchen, if that's what you do, but the new player won't know that. Make sure they know where the restroom is.

Inquire, in a friendly way, as to the new player's experiences. Have they ever played such-and-such kind of character? Do they like mystery adventures or more straightforward missions? And so on. This allows you to get to know them, but it also makes it clear that their past experience matters. Let them ask the group similar questions, if they wish, so they can get to know you as well.

Keep in mind that even if the new player has played the same game that you're playing now, they might have had very different experiences than you (consider all the different RPG styles covered in Chapter 2: Understanding RPGs). They might have stressed the rules, character development, or the story more in their old group. They may have been much more casual. Their previous GM might have had a very different approach.

BRINGING A NEW CHARACTER INTO A CAMPAIGN

Whether the player is new to RPGs or just new to this campaign, there are a few things you can do to help introduce a new character to the story.

Keep in mind that these tips also apply to an existing player in the group who brings in a brand-new character for some reason.

Give the new character a reason to join the other PCs. The easiest thing to do is give the new PC the same goal as the group. Maybe the new character knows that they can't achieve their goal without help.

Give the group a reason to trust the new character. In the fiction of the game, most likely the thing that bonds the existing characters together more than anything else is trust. They've been working together for some time now. Each one may have saved the lives of everyone else in the group already. When you add a new character, they don't have that background of shared experience. One of two things will likely happen. Either the PCs won't accept and trust the new character, or they will take one look at them and artificially accept them as if there's a huge flashing "Player Character" sign above their head. Neither is optimal for the story.

One well-worn trope is to have the existing group rescue the new PC, who was held captive by whomever the group was opposing at the time (vampires, cultists, orcs, evil androids, etc.). Perhaps a better way is to reverse it: put the existing characters in real peril and have the new PC save *them*. Now they've got a reason to trust the new character, and it doesn't put the new person in a bad position right off the bat.

Start the new character with something unique. Maybe they've got an ability the rest of the group has never seen. Maybe they have a piece of information that's valuable to the group. The goal here is to make the new character interesting not only to play, but also to meet and work with.

SOMEONE'S LEAVING

People move away. The commitments of life get too big to keep playing every week. Sadly, there are many reasons why a player might have to leave the game, so learning how best to handle the situation is in everyone's interest. You need to consider the feelings of the person leaving, but also the needs of the group that will continue playing. What works best will vary from person to person and group to group, but I'm going to make one recommendation: consider making the departure part of the game and part of the story. It's a great way to highlight how much you'll miss the player and their character, and give them a send-off. The PC goes off on their own personal quest and says farewell to their friends. The PC's superiors contact them and conscript them into an important secret mission. The PC just wants to settle down and retire. Any of these ideas, and many more like them, set up a moving scene that becomes part of the story. The player, obviously, should have the most say over this final ending.

A bad way to work the departure into the story is to kill the character. Yes, that happens in books and shows all the time, but it's not very satisfying for the player who has to leave. If I'm moving away and leaving my friends behind, I'd like to be able to look back fondly on my character and the group's shared adventures and imagine that my character is still out there somewhere. Plus, what if I come back for a visit? I'd love to bring my character back into the campaign for a brief but meaningful reunion.

Of course, playing online is always an option if the group suddenly finds itself separated by great distance. See Chapter 16: Playing Games Online (page 212) for more on playing games online.

THE BAD FIT

Sometimes there's a player who simply doesn't work well in the group. It doesn't mean that they're a bad person—they just want something different out of their gaming experiences. (In some cases, they might be a bad person, but either way, the exit is probably best handled the same way.)

The harsh truth is that you just need to be honest, even if that seems difficult. Ideally, this won't come as a shock to the person. You've probably already approached them about whatever problems have occurred (for more on handling problems among players, see Chapter 17: Solving Game Group Problems, page 217). If you haven't, you might want to back up a step and see if there's a way to work things out.

When you talk to the player, be upbeat but honest. Be specific. "You and Helen just can't seem to get along, and the arguments are taking away from everyone else's fun" or "You're always 45 minutes to an hour late every session, and that's taking away from everyone's time to enjoy the game." Remember that this is a game you're talking about, so emphasize that what's going on is impeding the fun. End the conversation with an idea of what they might do next. Recommend another group to them that might be a better fit, or suggest they check out the game club that meets next Monday. Something that gives direction.

Don't give them the hope that things might be different in the future unless that's actually true.

It's tempting to lie. It's tempting to say "We've decided not to play anymore," and then reconvene without them. You can even tell yourself that you're doing it to spare their feelings. But it's really not the best way. It's going to come back to bite you in the end, as lies almost always do.

BEING AWARE OF SENSITIVE ISSUES

Way back in chapter 2, I covered how a good game group should offer a comfortable, safe space for everyone involved. A part of this is dealing with issues that are sensitive to the players, and that means finding out what those topics are and staying aware of them.

There are topics—with sex and violence at the forefront—that require an understanding of the other people at the table. Think of it in terms of the movie rating system. Is this a G-rated game? PG? R? There is no right or wrong answer, but before you say or do anything in the game that isn't G-rated, make sure that everyone's on board. If there are younger people or kids at the table (or nearby), this probably becomes doubly important.

Other topics that might need special consideration include gender, race, religion, family, romance, death, illness, or trauma. Try to be open and upfront when learning what other people's sensitive topics are, but at the same time, even that's something you need to do with friendliness and sensitivity. Never be accusatory or come across as an interrogator.

Of course, if you have issues yourself, it's your responsibility to let the group know. You don't have to give details or say more than you wish, but it's only fair that you reveal what your red flags are. Most people will give you the respect and consideration you are due, but you have to let them know what your parameters are, and what your needs are.

Once you outline the boundaries for the group, you should be able to move within them easily. In fact, it's quite freeing to learn what you can explore and deal with. Maybe you've been hesitant to make romance a big part of the game, but it turns out that everyone else has been thinking they'd like it. Still, it's smart to check in with everyone at the table occasionally to make sure they're all fine with what's happening and what's being discussed.

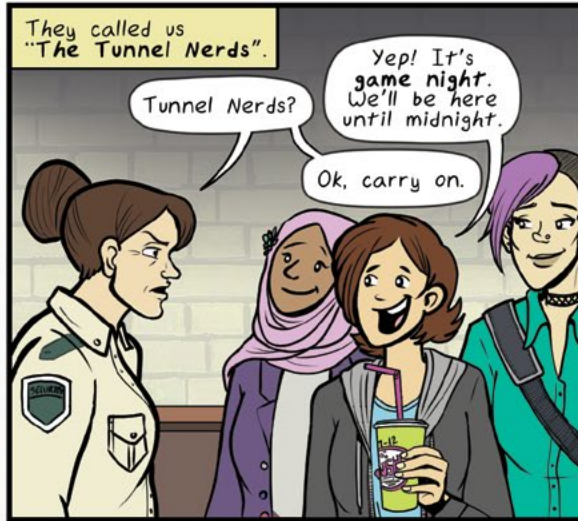
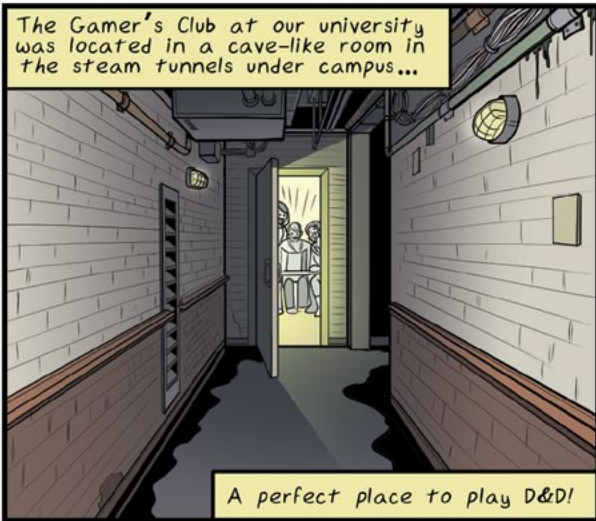
You Are Your Own Keeper

This book talks a lot about being aware of the needs of other people in the group, but it's important that you recognize your own needs as well. If you're bothered by something that happened in the game, or if you're just having a bad evening, recognize this fact and either find a solution or excuse yourself and go home early. You're there to have fun, and if you're not having fun, fix the situation or get out of it. If you're sitting there quiet and sullen, it's not doing you or the rest of the group any good.

This means that if someone does something or says something that bothers you, you need to speak up. More than likely, you'll be able to clear it up quickly. But keeping it inside or silently holding a grudge is only going to make the problem worse. And really, if someone does or says something offensive, it was probably a mistake. Not telling them how you feel isn't fair to them. Give them a chance to apologize, accept the apology, and then allow things to move on.

BONDING WITH YOUR GROUP

As I've written in earlier chapters, some of my best, longest-running friendships have been born and fostered in RPG groups. It really is a unique situation, getting to spend time with your friends not just watching a movie or hanging out in a bar (although those are fun too) but working together, devising plans, overcoming challenges, experiencing crushing defeats and exhilarating victories, and best of all creating stories, all while laughing, munching on snacks, and rolling dice. You're likely going to form real bonds with your fellow players, but let's consider for a moment how you can reinforce those bonds.



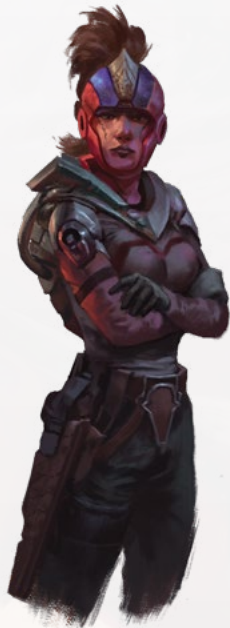
Alina Pete, weregeek.com

GETTING TO KNOW THE PLAYER AS WELL AS THE CHARACTER

You might know that Bill plays a dwarf warrior who hates dragons more than anything, and that Pamela plays a paladin with a penchant for always setting off traps at just the wrong moment, but your long-term friendship isn't with those characters—it's with Bill and Pamela. It behooves you to get to know them as people as well as characters. Now, that might just mean learning what they majored in at college or if they have siblings, but remember—RPGs are a special tool that can help bring you closer together. It's like a shared language or a common set of experiences that will allow you to bond.

Consider, over time, striking up conversations about the following with your group:

- ☞ How'd you get started playing RPGs?
- ☞ What's the most fun you've had playing an RPG?
- ☞ Who was your favorite character?
- ☞ What's your favorite rules system?
- ☞ What book or movie would you love to play as an RPG?
- ☞ What book or movie character would be a great inclusion in a campaign?



REMINISCING ABOUT IMAGINARY EVENTS

One thing that non-RPG players will never understand is our ability to talk about things that never happened as if they did. We can talk with sincere nostalgia and fond remembrance about scenes and adventures that took place only in our games. This might seem weird to some, but I contend that it's a good thing. I encourage you to have these kinds of discussions with your fellow players. It's very much a bonding opportunity. Talk about your game with your friends when you're not gaming. Continue—even for just a moment in the middle of the week—the joy of immersion that you got in the last game session. Since these games are played mostly in our own minds, that means that we can enjoy them anywhere, including well away from the game table, and well after the game is over.

I have more gaming stories than I can even begin to recall, and each is a cherished memory despite the fact that none of them are real.

Over time, you'll also almost certainly develop funny one-liners or catchphrases that are quotes from your games. The funny thing Ava said when the GM described the orc leader, or the absolutely scathing thing Carl's character said to the prince who betrayed the whole group. This is another way in which the game can bring you together as a bonding experience that other pastimes might not. In my own experience, one of my early game groups still has a game quote, "Have you seen any invisible people come by here?" that I'm certain everyone in the group will remember forever.

IN-GAME GIFT EXCHANGE

Around the holidays, people often like to give gifts. Sometimes, in a game group, this is fine, but sometimes it's a little awkward. On the one hand, it's fun to give and receive gifts from your friends, and you're spending a lot of time with these people. On the other, gifts can be expensive, and when it feels like an obligation it can become a hassle to find something appropriate. Obviously, everyone can probably use more cool dice, a new dice bag, or whatever, but after one holiday season, those options are exhausted. There might be a better way.

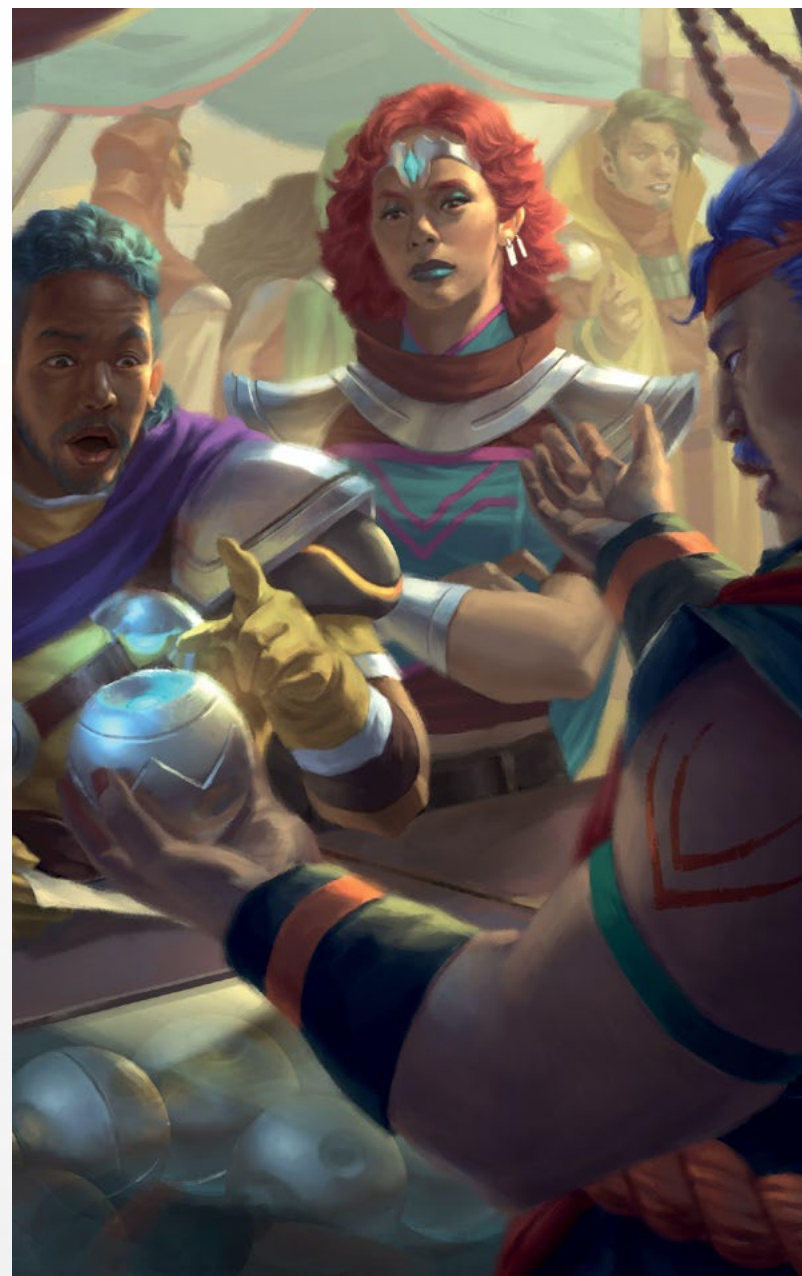
Consider an in-game gift exchange. The characters, not the players, exchange gifts. They just need a reason. If the holidays exist in the game setting already, you're good to go. If not, the group can create a gift-giving holiday in the world. To keep it manageable, the GM randomly assigns each character a PC to give a gift to, so everyone is getting a gift for just one character.

The gifts exist only in the fictional world, so they're just imaginary. They can be practical (a gun-toting warrior can always use more ammo), stylish (a cool new hat), or personal (a mystical way to send a message to the character's dead father). Because there's no real-world money, shopping, or wrapping involved, let your creativity go wild. In this case, it literally is the thought that counts, so the more thought you put into it, the better.

The GM should work with each player as they get their gifts ready. There's probably an in-game cost in terms of money or time or both. Sometimes, obtaining a gift can be a whole (probably short) side adventure in itself.

Gifts are exchanged as part of a session just like any other scene. Sometimes it's cool to find a photo or a piece of art to show. "The package you open has a new sword with a golden hilt and it looks like this, except with your name engraved on the pommel." Other times, a nice description is all that's needed.

One of the best parts of the holiday exchange is that it gives players a reason to interact in character in a completely relaxed atmosphere. It's a moment to kick back and focus on the characters you've created and the relationships they have in the game. Another great aspect is that it calls upon each player to think about a character other than their own, so they can think up the right gift. That character who's always nervous when they have to go into dark places? Get them a special high-end flashlight. The character who always has trouble dealing with faerie creatures? Give them a magical amulet that provides protection against the fae.



Welcoming Others to the Table

by Tanya DePass

The game table, be it real or virtual, should be a welcoming place to all. After all, we're about to indulge in a bit of fantasy, rolling of dice, and fun, right? Well, it's not fun and games for many people of color, queer and trans folks, and unfortunately a lot of women who shy away from stores, conventions, and events. However, you can change that as a GM or a player.

I've been playing D&D for a long time, and more often than not, there aren't a lot of people of color around the table, on the convention floor, or (more recently) on streams. Why, you might wonder? There are a lot of factors that go into it, at least in terms of conventions and the books we spend our loot on; there are few people of color at the bigger names in tabletop who are doing art or writing adventures.

It's often people left out of the bigger picture, conventions, and the larger publishing houses who begin creating their own worlds, crafting their own adventures, and inventing their own creatures to make space when others don't leave enough seats at the wider table. Things don't have to be like this.

How can you be more welcoming? How can you ensure that everyone has a seat at the table and doesn't have to use a safety tool within moments of sitting down or logging in? It's easier than you might think, yet taking that first step seems to be incredibly difficult for folks who can't fathom that their hobby may not be the same safe haven for others that it is for them. Here are a few tips on being more welcoming to everyone at your table.

Have a session zero: This is where player and GM needs should be communicated. This is the perfect time for anyone to tell the others what is literally off the table for them. Everyone has limits, and a session zero is the best place to share what can take you out of the game or ruin the experience.

Don't try to collect diverse players; be genuine: I'm often asked for a list of gamers who are "diverse" by well-meaning people who want to welcome others into or back to tabletop. But when diversity is just a qualifier, it seems like you're performing to show that you're better than others. Bring interested folks to the table, but be sure that it doesn't look like a United Colors of Benetton ad and that everyone feels safe with you as a GM and with the other players.

Try to avoid tropes and stereotypes in your game: In other words, don't make a black player at the table endure racism aimed at their character in an attempt at "realism." We want to escape into fantasy realms, not run right into racism-lite under the guise of in-world accuracy. This is especially true when the GM is not a person of color (POC) and has not experienced racism directed at them.

Special note on having women at the table, especially for male GMs: Stop using sexual assault and trauma as a backstory or something done to characters as a plot device. Too many women have stories of leaving games and not returning due to GMs doing this to their character without their consent. If the player wants to make this part of her character's story, it should be discussed and group consent should be sought, as you may or may not trigger someone by doing this while in play.

Finally, a note on streaming: If you're thinking about streaming your game, all of the above still applies, but also consider adding a layer of protection for players (including the GM) who will be on screen and not always available to deal with racism, sexism, homophobia, and other -isms in chat while they're playing. Have a good moderation team and a good rule set for the community.

CHAPTER 15: HOSTING THE GAME

What does it mean to be the host of the game, and how do you do it well?

Most people end up hosting games out of convenience or habit—they have the biggest house, or the one that's located in the middle of everyone else, or simply the one where you've always met. But there's more to being a host than just opening your door to a bunch of your dice-wielding friends.

One of your most important roles as a host is to be cognizant of the needs of both your game and your group. This includes everything from day, time, and length of sessions, to whether or not to use a table, to allergies and accessibility. It's a lot to wrangle, but just because you're hosting doesn't mean you have to do it on your own. Make it a coordinated effort with your players—they'll appreciate the opportunity to ease your load, while also having a say in the experience.

GAMING AWAY FROM HOME

One assumption is that if you're hosting, the game will be at your house, but that doesn't have to be the case. You can have a game at a game store, coffee shop, library, or other public space and still be the host. In this scenario, you'll be the one scouting the location, making any necessary reservations, ensuring that everyone knows how to get there, and doing any other prep that will make the game go more smoothly. You might also be the one who hangs onto and brings any equipment, character sheets, clipboards, or other items that the group will need.

AT A GAME STORE

Many game stores offer space to run your game session. However, you might have to be open to new players on an ongoing basis, because game stores want to continually bring new people into the hobby. You might be asked to teach new players the rules.

Be respectful of any rules the store might have about food.

Leave the game area in the condition you found it. Don't leave trash or food or anything behind.

IN A PUBLIC SPACE

With the idea that all you need is a table and some chairs, you can play an RPG in a public space like a restaurant, coffee shop, or bar. As with a game store, make sure you know all the policies that might affect you regarding food (particularly outside food), cleaning up when you're done, and loud voices.

Be aware that some gamers will feel very self-conscious about playing an RPG in a public space. You'll want to make sure that everyone is comfortable and having fun, even the introverts.

The main issue you'll have in a public space is noise. You don't want a place that's so noisy—due to large numbers of people, loud music, or blaring televisions—that hearing the other players is difficult. You also don't want a place where you have to worry about the noise you make. This is why a library is often not a great choice, although some libraries do have gaming spaces. (Just ask.)

Sometimes cafes, restaurants, or other places will have a room you can use or rent for your game. As long as there's a table and some chairs, you're probably good to go. Similarly, hotels have meeting room spaces you can use, but those are typically expensive. In a restaurant, one of these private rooms might be free if you meet a minimum order for food and drinks. Regardless of the venue, you'll likely have to reserve the room ahead of time.

As always, leave the table or room clean and tidy—the way it was when you arrived—so the establishment will be happy to have you return for another game.

Of course, public spaces have some drawbacks, including noise, lack of control over the atmosphere you're creating, and cost (typically for renting the space or for purchasing a minimum of food and drinks). Public games can be especially tough for players with hearing, vision, or speech impediments. On the other hand, they can be great for players who benefit from ramps, elevators, accessible bathrooms, and disabled parking.

Some groups might try playing on a camping trip in the woods, on a long train ride, or in some other unconventional space. Obviously, each such location will have its own challenges, but consider the benefits you might get in terms of mood or novelty.

You might also choose to rotate where you play, alternating between a variety of public spaces and members' homes. This has the advantage of spreading the burden of hosting (as well as travel time), but it also increases the possibility of people going to the wrong venue, forgetting to bring necessary equipment, or being frustrated by the constant change. In this situation, someone still needs to be the organizer, keeping track of when and where everyone is supposed to meet. That someone is the host.

HOST AND GM?

Another common assumption is that the host and the GM are always the same person, but that doesn't have to be the case either. In fact, the default assumption should be just the opposite. Maybe you have the best location for gaming but don't want to GM. Or maybe being both the host and the GM feels overwhelming. If that's the case, feel free to split the duties.

Alternatively, being both host and GM gives you a lot of control over the space you're in, from the music and lighting to the food you serve. So if you're the kind of GM who likes to control all variables for the ultimate gaming experience, it's possible that doing both is right for you.

PREPARING YOUR SPACE

If you've decided to host at your home, there are some simple ways to make the space the best it can be for your group. The basics, of course, are offering a clean, well-lit, accessible space where all of your players can fit comfortably. But all it takes is a tiny bit more effort to go beyond the basics and become a really fantastic host.

First, know where you're planning to play, and make sure that space is clean, clutter free, and ready for your players when they arrive. If you're also the GM, you might want to set up your GMing spot ahead of time, gather any necessary books and equipment, and check anything you're planning to use during the game, such as special lighting or a sound system. (If the GM is someone other than you, consider asking them if they want to come over a bit early to do this instead, so you're not spoiled by any cool revelations the GM has planned.)

If you're serving food and drinks, the kitchen is probably where most people will hang out during game breaks, so make sure it's clean and that you have, at the bare minimum, enough clean glasses to give everyone a glass of water.

Bathrooms are an important space that probably don't get enough attention. Make sure there's toilet paper, soap, and towels, as well as a garbage can (ideally with a lid). I know—these seem obvious, but you'd be surprised how often at least one of these is missing from a host's bathroom. If you want to go the extra mile, set out a basket or container stocked with items your players might need—tissues, allergy or pain meds, tampons, saline solution, eye drops, bandages, and so on. Alternatively, set out a container and invite players to bring their own stuff to stash at your house.

Will you be using any other rooms during the game? If so, give them a quick once-over as well, ensuring that everything's at the ready. (This also goes for other living creatures in the house—you'll want to make sure any kids or pets are fed, walked, or otherwise taken care of ahead of time as much as possible.)

You Are Responsible for Everyone's Fun

by Eloy Lasanta

When players surround a gaming table, there are a few who focus on what their characters can do, how good they are at a skill, what they plan to do in the story when it's their turn, and other things that are—frankly—selfish. A roleplaying game is a social game, which means it requires a high degree of player interaction and communication to ensure that everyone has a good time. The worst thing a player can do is attempt to hog the spotlight or ruin another player's fun, either directly or indirectly. To prevent this, players need to talk to each other, not to devise strategies or plots, but to state expectations and get to know each other. As soon as players get a sense of what the others at the table want, they can help facilitate that.

Just picture entering a cantina and, during the GM's description, you remember that another player's character is searching for their lost sibling. You may ask the GM, "Is there anyone here we can talk to about a kidnapping?" The GM may point the group to a collection of off-duty investigators or to a band of rogues who may know a rival's *modus operandi*. In either case, you've stepped out of the need to be

selfish and instead pushed the story forward for another player. Why didn't the other player ask themselves? They may have been distracted or focused on the single reason for visiting the cantina, or maybe they just never thought of going that route.

Note too that while the GM has a different title and role, they are also a player at the table. Players who go out of their way to ignore the story the GM is attempting to tell or who try to throw the game into chaos are ruining the GM's enjoyment of the session, even if the rest of the group is having fun. No one should be railroaded, but everyone at the table should be having as much fun as possible. The moment someone isn't, the group should press the pause button and take a moment to reassess the direction the game is going and how to course correct.

All of this is what we mean by teamwork. It's not just the characters who need to work together, but everyone at the table. As long as everyone knows they are responsible for everyone else's fun, you'll have a grand experience.

CONSIDERING PLAYER NEEDS

While creating your game space, be aware of players' allergies. Scented candles, air fresheners, and cuddly pets can set off allergic reactions and decrease everyone's enjoyment of the game. If you're playing outside, consider things like bees and pollen. Obviously, you can't entirely control most of these things, but you can prepare your players, who then know to bring their inhaler, allergy meds, or EpiPen. In the end, of course, it's your players' responsibility to make sure they've put on whatever form of armor they need before arriving at your house, but it's useful for them to know what they're likely to come up against.

Also pay attention to the accessibility of your spaces. This is everything from accessibility to players with mobility issues (stairs, small doors, multiple stories) to whether there's parking or bus access close by. Will players need to walk a distance to get to your house, pay for parking, or worry about encountering a neighbor's overly attentive dog on their way in? If so, let them know ahead of time so they can be prepared.

Lighting is another potential issue. It's great to have atmospheric lighting in your spooky horror game to set the tone, but not so great if no one can see their dice or their character sheets. If you want to



create atmosphere with low lighting or candles, consider also having small flashlights on hand for the players to read by (or increase their anticipation by asking them to bring their own).

Temperature is also important. If you know your house is always a bit warm or chilly, consider keeping fans or blankets stashed around for players, or suggest that they dress in layers so they can adjust their clothing as needed for comfort. You can even go so far as to keep a basket of slippers, mismatched socks, or fingerless gloves around for players to use (especially if they're willing to use them as props to incorporate them into their character).

TO TABLE OR NOT TO TABLE?

It's true that many tabletop games work best on a big table. Pretty much any game with a lot of dice rolling, battle mats, miniatures, cards, and so on is easier (and probably more fun) with everyone sitting around a table. A nice big table also gives everyone a place to stash their drinks and food, and it gives the GM lots of room for a GM screen, rulebooks, and dice rolling.

But there are some advantages to not using a table, especially for games with fewer physical needs. Sitting around in a circle in chairs or couches (or on the floor with pillows) without a table between you creates an intimacy that can really bring some games and experiences to life. It can help players (and thus their characters) feel closer to each other, both physically and emotionally. And it gives the GM interesting opportunities to move players around a room to emulate various in-game situations. For example, if two players are on the lower decks of the ship trying to repair the steam engine, those two might go sit together on the couch while everyone else, fighting off the pirates on the main deck, stands on the other side of the room.

An open space also gives people more flexibility in their seating needs. Sitting in a kitchen chair can be tough for someone with back issues, but a recliner, a couch, or a firm pillow on the floor might be the answer.

If you don't use a central table, you'll still want to provide flat, solid places for people to put food and drinks (out of the way of dogs and small humans), roll dice (cheap serving trays with lips are a great solution), and write on their character sheets (consider clipboards or lap desks).

CACHES AND STASHES

One important role of the host can be to keep track of the game's equipment. This can be everything from a simple shelf where you keep the rulebooks and other source material to a box that stores all of the players' character sheets, dice, tokens, and more. As a group, you can decide how you want to store things—some players will want to take home their sheets between sessions so they can make notes, while others know they'll forget to bring it if they don't leave it.

If you're not the GM, talk with them about their needs. Does the group want to go in together to buy a whiteboard that they can leave at your house for games? If the GM wants to play a special musical number during the game, is there a way to do that? What about internet access and outlets for any devices the GM needs to plug in?

You might also create a general group cache—a place for extra dice, pencils, pieces of paper, notebooks, and anything else that players will need from time to time. Anyone can add to it, anyone can take from it, and everyone knows where it is.

As with everything else, none of this is obligatory. If you don't have the space or don't want the responsibility, just let everyone know that they're in charge of their own stuff.



MAP THE SPACE FOR YOUR GROUP

The first time players show up, show them where the bathroom is, let them know whether they can help themselves to things in the fridge, point out the garbage, and make sure everyone knows where the game space is.

If you have off-limits spaces—maybe your housemate's room, your shelf full of fragile and expensive collectibles, or your cranky cat's corner of the couch—be sure to let everyone know ahead of time. As with almost everything else, early communication is the key. Don't wait for something to go wrong before you let everyone know what was expected of them. Give players everything they need to succeed in respecting your space. Set coasters out in visible places if the table surface matters to you, give players a heads up to wear their coolest socks because they'll have to take their shoes off, and make sure that one player who always spills everything has a to-go cup with the lid firmly planted. Have players who smoke? Let them know if that's an option, and if so, where they should do it.

This works the other way too—if you have children, pets, or housemates, let them know what to expect during the game. Are they invited to watch (get feedback from the players on this idea ahead of time, as some players aren't keen on extra eyeballs when they're playing) or would you prefer they stay elsewhere in the house? Do you have a plan for when your cat jumps on the table to bat at the dice every time someone makes a roll?

If you have the space, you might consider dedicating a safe place for your players—a room or a corner where they can go if they need to be alone for a few minutes. Sometimes games get intense, and a scene or situation can accidentally trigger a bad memory or difficult emotional place. Letting players know that they're welcome to leave the table at any time and go off on their own for a few minutes can help everyone handle tough experiences. The bathroom works great for this purpose if your house is small or if you share it with other people and privacy is scarce.

TIME AND SPACE

As the host, work with your group (and especially your GM, if that's not you) on timing. What time will you start? How long will you go? When do you want to take a break? Make sure everyone's on the same page for expectations. Is it okay to arrive five minutes early? How about fifteen? When the game's over, are you happy to have players hang around in your living room chatting, or will you be exhausted and ready for everyone to say goodbye (and, most likely, hang out in the driveway chatting instead)?

Consider setting a period of time before the game for real-world chitchat. Especially if your group doesn't get together very often, it's likely there will be a lot of talk about pets, jobs, families, movies, and other games. Rather than discourage that important connection or let it take over valuable game time, ask players to come fifteen or twenty minutes early with the understanding that you can catch up first, maybe have some snacks, and then start the game on time.

No matter what time you start, be prepared for people to be early or late, or have last-second questions. Don't hop in the shower five minutes before everyone's supposed to arrive, because that's invariably when someone will start knocking on your door. Keep your phone (or whatever tool you use for communicating with the group) on you in case someone is stuck in traffic, lost, or unable to make it at the last second.

FEED THE BEASTS

Gaming and noshing go hand in hand. Whether your group's the kind that wants to crack open a bag of chips and cans of soda, or the kind that prefers a more upscale, theme-oriented snack fest, refreshments are an important part of the experience.

Again, as the host, you're not obligated to provide all of the food and drink. Bring the other players into the fold too. Maybe everyone takes turns—one player brings food one week, and another brings drinks. Then it rotates until everyone's had a turn to bring their favorite goodies. Or

have everyone bring something small each week to pass around. The bonus is that the players get to share something they love with the rest of the group, and the group in turn often gets to try new things.

You can also order food. Likely, the ordering will fall into your hands as host (since you presumably know your address better than the others do and probably have a passing familiarity with the place you're ordering from). If you go this route, make sure everyone's on board with paying their share, and have a plan for that. Maybe you have someone different pay each time, or just have everyone bring cash in small bills. Otherwise it can get a little overwhelming if everyone wants to use a different payment app to give you their share, half of which you've never even heard of.

One caveat: remember that not everyone drinks alcohol or caffeine, and not everyone eats meat (or nuts or cheese or what have you), so ask about preferences and allergies ahead of time to ensure that there's always a variety of options and no one is left out.

If you're going to cook, try to get as much of it out of the way beforehand so you're not slowing down the start of the game or interrupting the flow. Feel free to ask players to bring something to add to the recipe, pot, or experience (but it's usually good to coordinate this a bit—you don't want all six people bringing bread).

If you want to offer sustenance but don't want to go too wild, you can find some simple food and drink recipes starting on page 232.

GOING FURTHER AFOOD

If you really want to pull off something spectacular, try serving food and drink that is themed to the game itself. I once ran a post-apocalyptic game where we matched the meals to the setting—we went to the thrift store and bought mismatched, broken dishes and silverware and made meals from what was still left in the world (canned beans and veggies, edible wild greens, and for dessert, those tasty snack treats that you just know will survive any apocalypse). It was a great way to set the mood for the game and make us feel immersed in the setting.

You can also pick up interesting and inexpensive dishes, napkins, and table decor at most party stores or dollar stores. Halloween stores are a great place to stock up on interesting horror or post-apocalyptic stuff for future games. Or, if you're crafty, you can make your own. Getting together with players at a paint-your-own-pottery place could be a fun way to spend non-gaming time together, while you all make themed plates, bowls, or cups.

Themed meals are fun because they do more than just fill bellies. They also fill your players' imaginations by bringing the smells, sights, and tastes of the setting right to them. See page 232 for sample themed food and drink recipes for fantasy, science fiction, post-apocalyptic, and even horror games.

SAYING GOODBYE

If you cooked (or if you didn't, but the kitchen was used), let players know if you'd like them to help you clean up a bit, or if you're just planning to leave it until the morning. Ditto with putting any furniture back where it belongs or returning gaming items to their storage spot. And, as I mentioned earlier, with hanging out and chatting after.

Your players are adults (unless they're not, of course, in which case hopefully you'll have other adult helpers around), so they don't need hand-holding at the end of a game, but it never hurts to make sure they have everything they came with. Power cords, coffee cups, extra food (or food containers), and dice bags are left behind far more often than you might imagine.

It's also a good idea to be accessible for a few minutes after everyone's walked out the door. You never know who left their car lights on, forgot to use the bathroom before they left, or just realized their wallet fell out of their pocket into your couch cushions.



CHAPTER 16: PLAYING GAMES ONLINE

Playing games over the internet is a fantastic opportunity that's only come to the fore in the last decade or so. It used to be that if your best gaming friends moved across the country, the game was over. But not anymore. Using a variety of methods, from Skype to Roll20 to a number of others, if everyone's got a webcam and a mic, you can all sit around the same virtual table even though you're miles apart.

OVERCOMING THE INVISIBLE BARRIER

While the technology's not too challenging, running and playing the game can be. If you're used to sitting in the same room with your friends, you'll find what I'm going to call the invisible barrier between you all. You're not in the same physical space, so a distraction for one person (a TV on in the next room, for example) isn't a distraction for everyone else. Player attention wanders in a way that it might not if you were in the same locale—you're all (by definition) sitting in front of a computer, so you check email. Or social media. The technology gives the illusion of proximity, but there's still a psychological distance between everyone. The issue comes down to communication and engagement.

The invisible barrier's not insurmountable. You just need a few guidelines to help get around it.

REMAIN AWARE

The first step to overcoming the invisible barrier is recognizing that it's there and that it affects players differently. The person in the later time zone sitting in the dark starts to get sleepy. The person who's more prone to distraction has greater opportunity to let their mind wander. Players who otherwise would be attentive if they were sitting among their friends find that they can't sit alone in a room doing nothing while someone else takes a turn, so they start checking Instagram or playing a game on their phone.

You have to remain aware of the barrier. If you forget and lapse into the same mindset you'd have at the table, you might start to see problems arise and some of the players start to drift away.

Keep up your energy, and don't let any one player drift off. Keep everyone engaged. If someone's quiet, address them specifically and ask what they think, what they plan to do, or something of that nature. Anything to bring them back to the game. And keep in mind that this isn't just the GM's problem to solve. Everyone involved should work toward this goal and remain aware of the problems that can arise and the distance that can form between each other.

FOCUS ON VISUALS

The second suggestion is to use visuals to stimulate interest and engagement. Many apps allow for screen sharing or have a way to show an image or a map to help immerse everyone in the game. In some ways, this is an advantage to online gaming, particularly if you're using an app that can show everyone the same map, indicate character positions on that map, and so on. And visuals aren't just the GM's responsibility. Players can find artwork that represents their character, their favorite item, or the little town where they're from.

Ironically, online gaming might be the time to break out physical props—specifically, those that can be held up to the webcam for everyone to see. Artwork, maps, notes, handheld items . . . if it's something you can hold up to the camera, it will be just as effective in this medium, if not more.

Last, you can use props online to great effect that you'd never bother with in an in-person game. Say an NPC just inflicted 7 points of damage on one of the PCs. The GM can hold up a playing card with a 7 on it. The player can then hold up their own card with a 7. Or maybe they hold up a 3, because that's how many hit points they have left. This works for initiative and other mechanics as well.

INCREASE PLAYER AGENCY

Another way to deal with the invisible barrier is to turn up the volume on player agency. It's everyone's responsibility to keep up the energy level in a game, to help contribute to the story, and to make things interesting for everyone else. In an online game, players should take even more upon themselves. One way to do that is for the group to agree that the players have more agency over the narrative and the world. Everyone will pay extra attention—despite the barrier—if they can make suggestions about what's going on around them. To facilitate this, the GM can call on the players for contributions even—or perhaps particularly—when it's not their turn. “Keith, what does the guard say when Sarah's character approaches?” “Richard, what are the bystanders in the back doing?” This increases engagement. (This kind of thing isn't everyone's play style, but it might be fun to try. Regardless of your preference, the whole group should be comfortable with understanding where player agency over the narrative and the setting begins and ends.)

COMMUNICATION

Beyond engagement, or rather the lack thereof, another problem that occurs in online gaming is communication. Unlike at a table, when playing online you can have only one conversation at a time, because if more than one person is speaking, you won't hear any of them. At a table, there's likely more focus on the GM (and certainly on the people you happen to be seated near), while online, everyone on your screen has the same emphasis. It's easy to lose what people are saying when they talk over each other.

A solution might be to have the GM adopt an “I have the conch” policy (from *Lord of the Flies*). The GM starts with the conch, meaning they're the one who can speak. Then they can metaphorically pass the conch to someone else to allow them to speak. And that person can pass the conch to another. And so on. The GM can take the conch back at any time. You could even have a physical representation of the conch, which might just be that the person with the conch holds up a pencil or something.

If you implement this rather draconian policy, you'll likely find that you don't have to do it for long. What it will accomplish is to quickly train everyone that they can't talk over other people.

ALL THE COMFORTS OF HOME

You can all sit in whatever chair is most comfortable to you (as long as you can still see your camera and screen). You can enjoy whatever kinds of snacks or beverages you want. Your entire book collection is right there if you need to reference the rules. You can't forget your character sheet at home because you are at home. There are a lot of advantages to gaming when everyone is at home.

Of course, you lose the ability to share your great snacks or borrow someone *else's* book to reference. Most important, you lose much of the communion that you get from spending a few hours in the physical presence of your friends. But you can coordinate ahead of time to overcome that somewhat. Tell everyone to show up at the game with a similar beverage. Or ask everyone to listen to the same music right before the session. Anything that you can do jointly while apart will help bridge the gap.

ONLINE GAMING AND KIDS

Don't forget that online gaming is a fantastic option for people who have small kids. Parents often find playing RPGs difficult because they have to leave their kids with a sitter (which is expensive), bring them to the session, or always be the hosts. A parent (or parents) can play online and stay home with the kids at the same time. Even if the parents are hosting, mom and dad have to be available for bedtime and other needs, which take them away from the game. But if you start the online session after the kids are in bed, that's not an issue.

The same is true for young teens who might want to play a game but have an early curfew. In person, they might have to be home by 9, but at home maybe they can play until 10. On top of that, online gaming provides a way for parents to be more aware of what's going on in the

games their kids are playing. If the young person is at the computer in the den, a parent can stop in a few times and check in with what's going on. Of course, the host's parent can do that with an in-person game, but with an online game, *all* the parents can do that.

In addition, someone who has a cold but still wants to play can do so without fear of spreading germs.

THE VALUE OF A QUICK GAME

Sometimes people drive a half hour or more to get to a session, dealing with traffic and other hassles, and then make the same long drive again to go home. They feel that for it to be worth the trouble, the game should be lengthy. But there's no commute in an online game. Maybe everyone wants to hop online for an hour or 90 minutes to play out a couple of encounters. There's no reason not to. And once again, this is particularly good for parents who can't start until after the kids are in bed, for younger players who have to finish homework first, or for people who have to work late.

On a related note, keep in mind that staring at a screen isn't like looking at real people. It can be tiring for many. In that light, consider making your online game shorter than an in-person game even if time isn't an issue. If you would normally play for four or five hours, consider an online game maximum of perhaps three to four hours.

THE STRENGTHS OF THE MEDIUM

There are many things you can do online that you can't do in person.

ENHANCED COMMUNICATION

We covered how communication can be hampered by the online medium. But what about how it can be enhanced? A player can text or direct message another player or the GM. The GM can give personal, pertinent information to just one player in the same way. The message can be conveyed without the other players even knowing that it

happened, which isn't the case with an in-person game. Just don't spend so much time typing that no one's talking to each other. The GM has an advantage, as they can have messages of this sort already typed into a document and ready to quickly paste into a chat window.

IMAGES AND VISUAL AIDS

The GM can create an online set of images at a site like Pinterest or Tumblr and share those easily with one, some, or all of the players. There are toolsets specifically designed for roleplaying games that allow everyone to see a map that gets revealed as the characters explore and that indicates everyone's position.

An online die roller can be used so that everyone can see every virtual roll, if that's desired.

ENHANCED MODERN GAMES

In a setting where the characters can do online searches for information, online gaming is great, because the players are already at their keyboards. It really sets the mood and tone of a modern or futuristic game, because technology is involved in the very medium you're using to play.

STREAMING GAMES

I've mentioned a few times throughout this book that you can watch people play games online to get a better sense of how RPGs work and learn from what they do. Well, turnabout is fair play. You can put your own games online for other people to watch.

The most straightforward way to do this is to stream them live, as they happen. This requires a really good connection. You can also record your game and then host the video recording online. You can even edit it, if you're feeling ambitious, although most people don't put that much effort into it, and sometimes editing can take away from the spontaneity and the feeling of being there that many viewers enjoy.

STREAMING AN ONLINE VS. IN-PERSON GAME

You can simply stream the online game that you're playing, or you can point a camera (or multiple cameras) at your in-person game table and the people around it.

The former is easier, but don't forget the difficulties mentioned above about achieving the desired level of interaction between members of the group.

Recording an in-person game has its own challenges. Keep in mind what is and isn't in frame at any given time. What's in the background? Will it be distracting? Is the microphone picking up everyone equally?

REQUIREMENTS OF UNDERSTANDING

Obviously, if you make your game available for all the world to see, you need the permission of everyone involved, and you need everyone to observe a certain level of online etiquette.

- ☞ Everyone needs to know the right level of maturity for the game, as that relates to language and content (particularly jokes). Using a movie rating as shorthand works pretty well. "This game is PG-13" sums things up nicely.
- ☞ Everyone needs to know the right level of politeness and decorum beyond simple maturity. Badmouthing the game you're playing might be bad form, for example. Being belligerent or rude to other people in the game certainly is.
- ☞ Everyone needs to recognize that they shouldn't give out information about themselves or the other participants that they wouldn't want everyone in the world to know.

- ☞ Playing in a streaming game is, on some level, performance. You need to try to be entertaining or at least interesting. You must be presentable and keep up a high level of energy and positivity.
- ☞ Everyone needs to know what behaviors are acceptable on camera. Is it okay to eat during the game? Is it okay to get up to take a break when needed, or will there be a scheduled break?

NEEDS

Beyond the issues that everyone has to understand, you'll need a few other things in order to stream your game.

- ☞ You probably need better cameras and microphones for a streaming game than you do for a private online game.
- ☞ Everyone involved should have a presentable background—a messy kitchen is not really appropriate.
- ☞ You need a way for the people on camera to communicate without speaking for passing messages they don't want the audience to hear. A text or group chat is a good idea.



GMING at a Convention

by Stacy Dellorfano

If you enjoy GMing, I highly recommend giving conventions a try. It's an experience like no other, and it can get you free badges, rooms, food, and other perks in return for running games for conventions and gaming companies.

The first time you set out to do this, run a game you feel comfortable teaching. Then, when you submit your game to the convention, indicate that the skill level is for beginners. Chances are, you'll end up with a table of players new to this game, but not new to RPGs in general. They already know the broad strokes of roleplaying, so teaching them the details of this particular system will be a snap.

Set your game to last one hour longer than you think it'll take to run the adventure. This will allow you breathing room to set up beforehand and to socialize and pack up after.

When prepping your game, aim everything you do at expediency. You have a hard time limit before you have to give up your table and your group and game disappear forever, so every moment spent looking things up in a book is costly.

Create characters for your game ahead of time. These are called pregenerated characters or pregens. Do the most time-consuming portions of character generation yourself, while leaving options available for player customization. Leave out anything that dictates the identity or appearance of the character and give the players a sheet of options they can choose from for weapons, armor, inventory, abilities, and/or background details.

At the convention, give yourself enough time between events to get from one place to another. Plan to arrive at your table early. If your table isn't ready when you arrive, take the opportunity to make sure your water bottle is full and grab a snack.

Conventions are busy places and games run long, so you'll want to give your players about fifteen minutes to arrive. While you're waiting, introduce yourself to people as they arrive, have them choose their characters, and hand them name tents on which they can write crucial information like their character's name, role, and pronouns.

Once character generation is complete, go around the table and have your players introduce their characters, then run through a short round-robin exercise to create background connections within the group. It'll help break the ice and get everyone comfortable before the actual game begins.

While running the game, be patient with everyone, and make sure all the players at the table get their chance in the spotlight at least once. Be the kind of GM you'd like to play a game with, and you won't go wrong.

Convention games come with their own challenges, but the rewards can last a lifetime. Over the years, I've made many new friends this way and gathered lots of stories about how creative, ingenious, funny, and amazing my players have been. Look for local conventions in your area and give it a try!

CHAPTER 17: SOLVING GAME GROUP PROBLEMS

I was tempted to call this chapter “Problem Players,” but I don’t think that’s fair. Players might *have* problems, but they aren’t problems themselves. They’re people. In fact, they’re your friends.

Much of the advice in this chapter can be summed up by simply saying, “Talk it out.” Most problems are solved by talking to the people involved and finding a solution. We’ll call those “people solutions for people problems.” In-game solutions, meaning something happening to the characters, are never good ways to deal with people problems. The GM shouldn’t punish players with sudden awful events, and players shouldn’t trick, threaten, or control other PCs in the story to deal with people problems. And to be clear, all the problems in this chapter are people problems. A malfunctioning robot gone berserk is a problem that needs an in-game solution. An argument among the players is one that needs a people solution.

Further, these are almost all group problems, not individual problems, and thus they need to be solved by everyone discussing the issue together. Even problems caused by one person are really group problems. Which also means that the solutions come from the group. Neither the GM nor any single player should be the only one who handles all these issues.

RULES LAWYERS

Knowing the rules is a good thing. Constantly, pedantically correcting everyone else’s knowledge of the rules, or arguing with the GM about the rules, is not.

Insisting on always bringing up the rules, contradicting other players or the GM’s knowledge of the rules, or generally quoting the rules “chapter and verse” is called rules lawyering. You often recognize it when someone starts their statement by saying, “Well, actually . . .” as

in, “Well, actually, on page 87 it says that when encumbered, a character can’t take a full move on uneven ground . . .”

Rules lawyers take comfort and gain confidence by a deep understanding of the rules of any game they play, whether RPG, board game, card game, or other—it doesn’t matter. And there’s nothing wrong with that. There’s nothing wrong with having a deep understanding of and a close reliance on the rules. (I mean, I’m a game designer. I understand having a relationship with game rules.) You don’t want to take away someone’s source of comfort and confidence.

Rules experts aren’t a problem unless they become rules lawyers, and by that, I mean almost acting like a lawyer in a courtroom drama. “I object!” they might say when someone forgets an important rule (and to them, they’re all important rules). They see themselves as an authority figure because of their rules knowledge, and it’s important to them that everyone gets the rules right.

It’s handy to have someone at the table who knows all the rules, so the trick here is to turn a rules lawyer back into a useful expert. The best way is to tell them that you appreciate their knowledge, but that everyone enjoys the game differently. Not everyone is so focused on the rules, and interrupting people to correct their rules usage takes away from their focus on their character or the story. You can also suggest a table rule that unless the GM asks, no one can bring up the rules. This means that the GM might talk about the rules, but they will always be the one who asks for a die roll or how a player’s ability works. Everyone else will talk about their character or the story. This will be hard for the rules lover, but to keep them happy, the GM can make a point of always asking them rule questions rather than looking things up in the book.

There’s another kind of rules lawyer that comes up in particular when the group uses a well-known setting, whether it is one designed specifically for gaming (like the Forgotten Realms) or not (like, say, the



setting of the movie *The Matrix*). People who focus on these settings and the details that comprise them might be thought of as “setting lawyers.” If you’re playing in a game set in the Star Trek universe, they might interrupt your action to say that a Vulcan would never actually do that, or that transporters don’t work the way you think.

Just like rules lawyers, setting lawyers are useful resources if they can be constrained, and the solution for the problem is more or less the same.

RULES IGNORERS

This is the opposite of having a rules lawyer in the group. This problem occurs when a player refuses to learn even the basics of the rules, to the point where three months into a campaign, they still need to be told what die to roll every time it’s their turn. This isn’t the worst thing that can happen to your game, but if the rest of the group is getting tired

of handling all of this player’s mechanical issues, it can be seen as a problem.

There needs to be a minimum amount of rules knowledge someone should have after a reasonable amount of play. Which dice to roll to resolve the character’s most basic actions is a good place to start. What a character’s stats mean, what their special abilities are—no one should have to coach a player on these things after three or four sessions, at most.

ARGUMENTS

Disagreements happen in every group. The key is to make sure they don’t disrupt everyone’s fun by turning into a heated argument.

Don’t make the GM be the arbiter of arguments. They’re already a rules arbiter and a referee for the game. They shouldn’t have to referee other things too. Plus, one of the more frequent types of disagreements

Helping Shy Players Shine

by Shanna Germain

I'm a hugely shy person, even in small groups of people that I've known a long time. Which, not surprisingly, can make roleplaying tricky. I don't want to talk over others, so I won't just jump into a rapid-fire conversation, but at the same time I find myself freezing when the spotlight's on me. Luckily, I've had some great GMs who helped me shine at the table, and I use some of those techniques when I have shy players in my games.

First, talk to the player and see if they actually want to change their game experience. Some shy players are happy to stay in the background, doing the majority of their roleplay in their own heads. The goal isn't to force anyone to change; it's just to help those who want to become more interactive players.

Start by creating space for them, without shining the spotlight so brightly that they feel overwhelmed. Actively invite the player to participate by asking "What is your character doing now?" and give them time to answer. If the player seems uncomfortable, you can offer

a suggestion of something their character might do, or gently let them off the hook by asking if they want to hold their answer until later. The idea isn't to force them to interact, but to give them space to do so if they desire. As time goes on, they'll hopefully learn to trust that space and use it more and more.

You can enlist other players to help you with this too. Ask them to be aware of how much they're interacting, and to be sure to leave space for everyone to have a turn. Have their characters ask the shy player's character for advice or help with the task. These one-on-one conversations are great chances for a shy roleplayer to go deeper into their character without having to interact with the entire group at once.

Perhaps the most important thing is to work with the group to create a safe table. If everyone is supportive and encouraging of each other, shy players will often be able to come out of their shell, knowing that the other players, and their GM, will always have their backs.

is a player arguing with the GM, so the GM is a participant. Instead, someone at the table not involved in the argument should be the peacemaker, hopefully before tempers really flare.

To be a peacemaker, don't get involved in the details of the disagreement. Instead, appeal to the feelings everyone has for the game. It's a game. We're here to have fun. We want to tell a story together. Maybe we can deal with this after the game. You can even try to defuse the situation by using a fictional element from the game (a little tongue-in-cheek). "If we can all work together to defeat the Dragon of the Dark Diamond, we can resolve this."

If none of that works, and it's clear that the session's not going to continue until the issue is settled, take a short break. Have everyone

get a snack or a drink. Don't talk about the problem—give everyone some distance from it. When you reconvene, the peacemaker should give each person involved a chance to state their point of view. Repeat back to them, in turn, a summary of what they said to show that they've been heard. Then try hard to come up with a solution that incorporates both points of view to some degree, at least a little. If one person wants to leave the dungeon and go back to town, and the other insists on pressing forward because they want to get the magic spear they know is here, suggest that the group go back to town and then return as soon as possible. Or suggest that you get the spear and then leave the moment it's found. If that's not possible, choose one player (or roll a die to choose randomly) and say that you'll do what they want this time, but

the next time a decision needs to be made, the group will let the other person make the call.

Of course, the disagreement might not be about the story in the game at all. It might be a rules argument or a disagreement about what game to play. It might be about something that is outside the game altogether. In this case, you need to encourage the people involved to resolve it away from the table, after the game is done.

DISRUPTIVE CHOICES

The PCs have come to talk to the mayor about urgent business, and one player decides that their character will try to steal from the mayor's office. Or the PCs are negotiating a truce with the goblins, and the wizard suddenly casts a fireball into the midst of the goblins. Or the PCs are trying to fix the space station computer and one player, bored, sends their character off to start opening doors, even though they know there are carnivorous aliens everywhere. Sometimes one player makes a choice that utterly disrupts the story and—worse—everyone else's fun.

Now, sometimes a surprise from one player is fun. It's done in character, it makes the story better, and it delights everyone. But often these are the exception, not the rule.

There's a phrase entertainers use: read the room. As a player, you need to do just that. Try to figure out how the other players feel about what's going on. If everyone's having fun doing one thing, and you get it into your head to do something different, and your action will disrupt what everyone else is doing, you probably shouldn't do it.

If another player does that, the solution is to be forthright and, if possible, immediate. "Hey, before you do that," you might say, "can I just say, we're all doing something cool here—working together—that's making for a good story, and what you're saying your character is doing will wreck all that. Any chance you'd rather join in with what we're doing? Maybe we can help you do what you want after that's done."

Players who take disruptive actions usually do it for one of three reasons:

- ☹ They're bored with what the rest of the group is doing. The group's solving a puzzle, but they like fighting, so they want to go off and pick a fight. If this is the case, assure them that you can all work together to engage in combat with an enemy in due time, but right now the group should stick to the story.
- ☹ They want attention. Maybe the group is engaged in a conversation with an NPC and that's not their PC's forte, so the player doesn't think they're getting enough of the spotlight. The solution here is to bring them in to what the rest of the group is doing—give them a role and a purpose. Maybe tell them, "Watch our backs, because we don't know if we can trust these guys."
- ☹ They think it will be funny. They honestly think the rest of the group will be amused by their surprising action. If they're mistaken, just tell them so.

A good GM will be forgiving in these cases and let the disruptive player take back the action if they wish. People make mistakes, and we shouldn't take them too seriously.

As in so many situations like this, the GM might be tempted to use the story to teach the player not to be disruptive again. The PC's thief is caught by the mayor's guards and thrown in jail, goblin reinforcements show up and attack, or aliens swarm out, looking for a meal. While consequences for actions are good, no one should be under the impression that they will "teach the player a lesson," or that it's even a good idea for the GM to teach players lessons in the first place. More often than not, it's the whole group that pays the price, which drives a wedge between the player and the rest of the group because everyone's unhappy and the disruptive player feels defensive.

UNPREPARED PLAYERS

Richard shows up for the game and has forgotten his character sheet. Again. Paul always borrows other people's dice or books. Kerry never remembers what happened last session and needs a whole recap of the events.

Richard should bring his character sheet, obviously. But if he's really that forgetful, the GM can have all players hand over copies of their character sheets so there's always a backup in the GM's notebook. This isn't a terrible idea anyway, because it means that during prep, the GM can reference what abilities a particular character has, who's the smartest person in the group, or what have you.

Paul should bring his own stuff unless the group decides to share books and materials. Maybe the host has a big bowl of community dice, for example. Maybe there is one community rulebook that everyone shares. Paul might not have his own stuff because he can't afford it, and that shouldn't be a reason he can't play. There's a difference between someone in need and a mooch.

Someone should encourage Kerry to take notes during the game. This doesn't have to be an arduous task. Just a couple of points to jog her memory for next time. Alternatively, someone can meet up with Kerry before the game so the two of them can chat about the last session and come to the game prepared.

POOR REACTIONS

You'd think that in a game with no winners, you'd never have sore losers, but you'd be wrong. People can get angry when things don't go their way, when they roll poorly, or when something terrible happens to their character.

If this happens once, you can probably ignore it. We all have bad days. If it happens more than that, talk to the player who is reacting this way. Find out the reason behind the anger or the outburst. It might simply be that they're so invested in the character and the story that

they hate to see things go wrong. Remind them that sometimes things go wrong in the best of stories—it just provides greater challenges to overcome as part of that story.

More often, though, these kinds of reactions come from performance anxiety. The player wants to do well in front of their friends, and a bad die roll or turn of events will seem to reflect poorly on them (at least, that's how they see it). Reassure them that that's not the case. Remind them of a time when another character also had bad fortune.

If the GM has a poor reaction, handle it more or less the same way. Maybe the GM put a great plan in motion, but luck or player actions threw a wrench into the works. Tell them that everyone's having a great time regardless, and you've got nothing but confidence that they'll figure out a way to thread everything together into a great story.

BOREDOM

Sometimes the action slows down or events in the game get repetitive. You're all waiting for Tim to finally select which psychic ability his character will use, and it takes him forever (see page 223 for more on that specific problem) and everyone gets bored.

A bored player starts flipping through a book or tries to start up unrelated side discussions with another player. They might ask if they can turn on the television to see how the football game's going. Some players will start taking foolish, out-of-character actions to alleviate their boredom (or worse, to bring the whole game they're not enjoying to an unexpected end).

None of this is great. One person not having fun quickly leads to everyone at the table not having that much fun. It's like enjoying a movie that you're watching, but you realize that the person you're with is hating it. It's almost impossible to enjoy it then, at least to the degree that you'd enjoy it if you weren't with them.

Because a bored player can drag down the whole session for everyone, it's important to fix the problem quickly. Take a break, and take

the bored player aside. “You seem bored. Is there anything we can do to make the game more fun for you?” When you say this, they’ll almost certainly deny being bored. Press them a little bit and say, “Are you sure there isn’t something we can be doing differently?” Maybe they’ll have an answer. And if it’s reasonable, try to make it happen. If they say that the whole session is just fight after fight and it’s repetitive, when the break’s over try to take things in a new direction and get the bored player directly involved. If Beth is the bored player, say, “Beth and I talked, and we don’t know if we’re getting anywhere fighting all these zombies. Let’s see if we can sneak by them instead. Beth, how can we find a route to slip past them?”

Sometimes, though, a player’s just not into it. They might be having a bad day, they might not like this particular game or scenario, or they might be burned out on RPGs entirely and need a break. In this case, it’s okay to suggest that they sit this one out. They don’t have to leave, but they can do something else while everyone else finishes up the session. Or—and this is more drastic—maybe bring that session to an early end, and you can all do something different that evening (watch a movie, talk over drinks, etc.).

Boredom can happen in particular with someone whose heart isn’t entirely in the experience. Perhaps one of the players brought their boyfriend or girlfriend along, and that person is not a big roleplayer. They’re just there because their significant other is. Or maybe someone’s cousin visiting from out of town has joined the game, but only because they don’t have anything else to do. They don’t really pay attention, don’t get into their character, and don’t try to understand the mechanics. This is something to watch out for. You might have to ask the regular player not to bring that person anymore.

DISTRACTIONS

Someone keeps checking their phone. They flip through a book. They take out their knitting. They constantly fidget with their dice. They’re not bored (if they are, see above), but they are distracted, and they might be distracting others at the table too.

There are lots of different reasons for this. Nervous habits, an inability to be fully present, or the mistaken belief that they can multitask. You might have to set table rules to forbid phones, books, and so on during the game. Sometimes, though, particularly in a more casual game, everyone else at the table can adapt. Let the knitter knit. Let the fidgeter stack or spin or otherwise play with their dice, and don’t let it distract from the game.

Distractions from outside the game group can be worse. One player keeps getting texts or phone calls. The kids are always running into the room demanding attention. The host’s dad is watching TV in the room, or their roommate is blasting music in the next room.

Again, banning phones at the game table is not a terrible idea. And, if possible, maybe try to find a new place to play next session where there are fewer distractions.

There are tricks, however, to keeping the attention of everyone (or most everyone) at the table focused on the game, even with distractions. The GM should make eye contact with the players when they describe a scene. The players should do likewise—with the GM and with the other players—when they state their action. Talk in an authoritative tone (but don’t just be loud). Use an economy of words, if possible, but try to keep quiet moments, like when someone’s making a decision or looking up a rule, to a minimum. Go out of your way to make the events of the game so enticing and exciting that it becomes easier and easier to ignore those texts or the sounds of the television. It really can work. The human brain is good at ignoring things that don’t matter if given a reason.

INDECISION

Tim's got a whole bunch of psychic abilities, and when it comes to his turn, he agonizes over which to use. Every time. His turn takes as long as everyone else's put together, so game situations move too slowly.

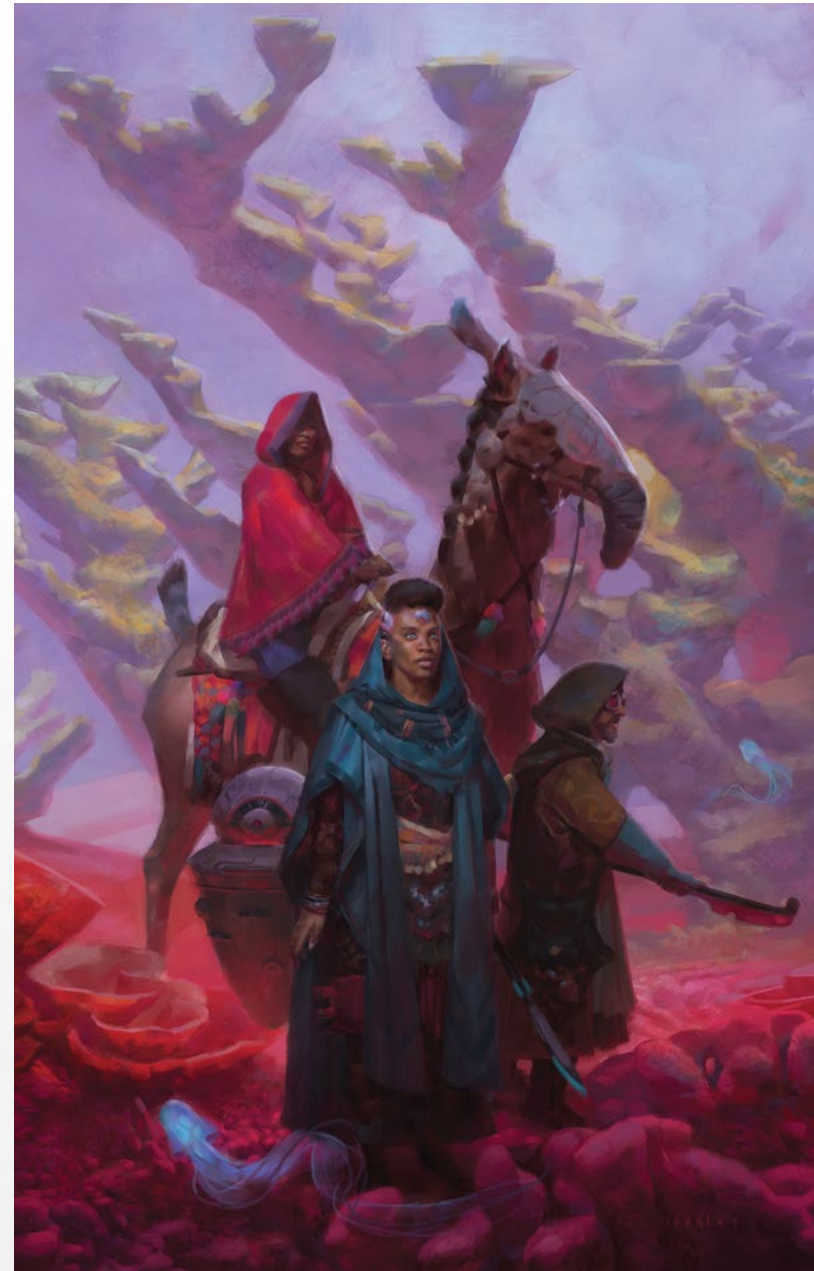
Berating Tim during the game, even in a friendly, jokey, passive-aggressive way, will only make things worse. It will distract him from the decision and probably make him nervous or self-conscious, slowing him down even more. Instead, take Tim aside and help him put together a sort of cheat sheet. On this sheet, it says, "Always use Mind Shield first thing in a dangerous encounter. When facing a single powerful foe with great defenses, use Mental Onslaught. When facing a group of foes, use Psychic Burst." And so on. This preplanning will help him make quick decisions during the game.

Then ask him to try hard to make the decision while everyone else is taking their action. That way, when it's his turn, he's ready to go. If he knows what he's going to do and what dice to roll to use that ability, he can even roll them ahead of time and be ready with the results.

Note that if someone's not paying attention so they're not ready when their turn comes and everything they missed has to be explained to them, that's not an indecision problem, it's a boredom or distraction problem. See the previous sections.

FAVORITISM/VICTIMIZATION

GM favoritism can be a problem, but I covered that in Chapter 8: Game Master Basics. Here I'm referring to something that happens a lot in groups, where there's either one player or character that everyone else focuses on, or one player or character that everyone else picks on. The favorite player/character gets all the great enhancement spells cast on them or gets the best treasure. The player/character who is the butt of everyone's jokes doesn't get the cool stuff; when they roll a fumble, everyone laughs twice as hard, and when they succeed, everyone acts as though it's the exception, not the rule.





Neither of these is great, but the latter—the victimization—is particularly terrible. The player is often good-natured or long-suffering about it, but I can almost guarantee that they don't enjoy it like you think they do.

No special advice here. Just calling it out, as both problems are frequent results of various group dynamics, so avoid them if you can help it.

GAME CRITIQUING

More than just bringing up a rule from the book, a player complains that a particular rule is broken. They're not arguing with the GM's interpretation—they're unhappy with the rules as written. And they have a long explanation as to why they're unhappy, and they want to have that meta discussion about the game right now, in the middle of the session.

This is disruptive, it brings the game to a sudden halt, and it makes the people who were enjoying the game feel worse about it. (Let me tell you, while this is a general problem that can affect any group, if you have a table full of professional game designers, this is an issue you deal with all the time. All. The. Time.)

Just make it a rule that meta discussions about how the game rules should work, or why the game isn't working, must take place outside the session. Take the time after the session to have the discussion, as the points raised might be valid, but during the game they're only disruptive and disheartening.

INTROVERTS

Everyone's talking and laughing and having a good time. Each player is eager to state their character's actions and roll dice. Except for one player, who's kind of quiet, just looking over their character sheet or paging through a rulebook. This person doesn't engage with everyone else or with the game in the same way as the rest of the group. In a game about talking, they aren't doing it much.

The first thing to do is approach them away from the table, perhaps after a session, and ask how they think things are going. Your goal is to find out if they're having a good time. Don't put them on the spot. Don't say, "Hey, it looks like you're not having fun." That only backs them into a corner. But if you conversationally bring up an event in the game and ask how they thought it went, you might get a good idea of how happy or not they are to be playing.

You might be surprised. They might be having a great time, but they show it differently, and the good time they're having is mostly in their own head. There's nothing wrong with that, and if they're having fun, there's no problem. Let them do their thing the way they want to do it.

If, on the other hand, they're frustrated because there are things they want to do in the game but can't, ask if it's because they're having a difficult time getting a word in edgewise with the rest of the group. Introverts, sometimes, need to be given a lot of space before they'll speak up. They typically don't interrupt others. If this is the case, in the next session, go out of your way to give them the opportunity to talk. Ask them what they think or what they want to do. Be positive and upbeat in response to what they say (without being condescending, of course).

Unfortunately, that might also be exactly the wrong thing to do. Some introverts don't want the spotlight on them at all. They don't want everyone looking at them or listening to them. If you're the GM in this case, give them a chance to interact with you outside of the regular session to discuss what they want their character to do. Many shy people have less of an issue interacting one on one.

If you're a player, consider making that person's character the partner of your character. While the rest of the group is focused on something else, you can quietly say to them, "Hey, how about you and I go see if we can find the key that fell through the grate?" If they agree, on your turn you can say to the GM, "We're going to look for the key."

One thing to remember is that not all introverts are quiet and reserved. Sometimes, they're just people who can get overwhelmed by interacting with others for long periods of time. They might be open and

dynamic at the game table, but after two or three hours, they begin to fade. You'll see them start to get quiet and sort of shrink into themselves a bit. This might just mean that your sessions are too long. Or maybe expect that particular player to participate more at the beginning and plan accordingly.

EXTROVERTS

If you have a player who's always talking, that's bad in a game that's all about talking, because it means that they're the only one playing.

This problem takes two forms.

The first is the person who dominates the game. Every time there's a door, they have to be the one who opens it. Every time there's an NPC, they have to do the talking. And so on. For obvious reasons, this is not fun for everyone else. You've got to communicate to this player that by acting like this, they're literally keeping the others from playing. It's the RPG version of an actor stealing the spotlight from the other actors, or a basketball player hogging the ball. Maybe explain it to them just like that. Tell them the group appreciates their enthusiasm, likes their character, and likes playing with them. But they need to give everyone else some space. Everyone needs the chance to take a turn, not just mechanically in the rules, but in being an important character who gets to do the important thing at that moment. It's an ensemble cast—the extrovert is not the lead character with the other players being supporting characters. Most of the time, a player like this just needs a little reminding. It is almost certainly the result of an enthusiastic extrovert, with no malice intended.

The second form the talkative player problem can take is the extrovert who talks all the time, but not about the game. In the middle of a scene, they'll start talking about something funny that happened on the way to the game that night, or how they just bought a great new computer game. This often arises because that's how they normally operate in social situations. At a party they're always full of things to say.

The First-Session Rule

by Charles M. Ryan

It's 1965, and you're working on a groundbreaking new sci fi TV series. You put together a pilot, and it's well received by the network and the public, so you're on for a full series. All is right with the world . . .

Except that doctor guy was really no good. And the physicist kind of duplicates the role of the science officer. And the folks playing the navigator and the yeoman aren't quite right. And, while we're at it, the uniforms need a little tweaking. And the phasers.

Well, what can you do? Nothing, right? I mean, the pilot is done. These bad choices are now set in stone.

Or are they? What if you just made the changes and plowed forward with the new episodes as if those changes had been part of the show all along? Change the physicist to a helmsman. Tweak the uniforms. Swap around characters—or actors—to get the doctor and navigator and yeoman you need. Will the audience forgive you? Will they even notice?

That's not an entirely accurate description of how things went down with the original *Star Trek* series, but it's close enough to make the point. So let's apply it to gaming. You're launching a new campaign. Everybody gets together, you make up some characters, and you play for a few hours.

And . . . it turns out that the fighter's feat choices aren't really lining up with the player's approach to the character. Or the cleric and wizard are a little too close in personality and appearance. Or the rogue had no idea he was going to go down so easily, and wants to completely rebuild the character.

I play with something I call the "first-session rule." Like a director putting together a pilot in the old days of network TV, I assume

things aren't going to work out perfectly from the get-go. There will be character choices that weren't exactly right for the setting or the chemistry of the group. A couple of characters will seem to overlap too much, or some key need won't be covered as well as the group would have liked. In some cases, a player simply might not like what they came up with.

So here's the first-session rule: go ahead and make the change. Whatever you want (within the context of the rules, of course). Keep the experience points you've earned and any items or info you've picked up along the way. And we'll just ignore the changes and play as if things had always been that way.

It's counterintuitive. I mean, continuity matters, right? Yes, but I've used this rule for a couple of decades, and I've never once regretted it. A few adventures down the road, who remembers what feats the fighter might or might not have had in those early sessions? Even when a character changes completely—race, class, build, name, whatever—it's not generally what makes those first sessions memorable. And remember: unlike a TV show, nobody can go back and rewatch the first session. There's no permanent record (well, not unless you record or stream it, but that's up to you).

And I think this rule has even saved some campaigns that otherwise might have fizzled early. It takes only one or two unenthusiastic players to stall a campaign in its infancy. The first-session rule sacrifices a little continuity for a stronger long-term party and a greater campaign.

Maybe they're the kind of person who needs to fill lulls in a conversation with more talk. That might be fine in other contexts, but in an RPG, the group needs—more or less—to stay focused on the game. (If you're playing a very casual game, this might not be an issue.) That lull they're trying to fill might come about as another player is trying to decide on their character's action, which means that in effect the extrovert is interrupting that player's turn. The solution is to explain to them that this behavior isn't appreciated, but then as a group make time in the session—before, after, or with a break in the middle—to socialize, talk about the events of the week, and generally chitchat.

PLAYING OTHER PEOPLE'S CHARACTERS

It's Sarah's turn, and Richard suggests which spell she should cast or where her character should move. Keith states his character's action, but Richard interrupts and tells him what he should do instead. It can go so far as when Sarah rolls for her action, Richard reads the die and announces the roll before she can. Maybe he's even added the die modifier for her already.

This kind of thing happens most often in tactical or action scenes. And it's usually the case that Richard is a more experienced player.

Richard is effectively playing Sarah and Keith's characters. They're not getting to play because he's playing for them. Regardless of how it manifests, the situation is likely quite frustrating for Sarah and Keith. But if they say something, Richard just says that he's trying to be helpful. And maybe in his mind, that's true.

As with all such issues, this is a table problem, not a GM problem. So many times we rely on the GM to solve or arbitrate or police problems, but unless it directly involves game mastering, we shouldn't do that. It's too much responsibility to give to one person. Besides, in this scenario, the one offering the unsolicited suggestions might be the GM.

So Sarah and Keith need to speak up. Not in anger, but in a calm, straightforward matter to Richard, probably with the whole group present. "Let me play my character when it's my turn," they should say. "I know you want to help, but I won't get to learn how to do this as well as you do if I don't make my own decisions." They might need to be forceful when they say this.

Let's look at it from Richard's point of view for a moment. He loves the rules, most likely, and is showing enthusiasm for the game, even if it's in an annoying way. He's not entirely content just playing his own character. Sarah and Keith should agree that if they're stuck or have rules questions, they'll ask Richard. It might, in fact, be handy if Sarah can ask Richard to look up a spell description for her while she figures out what to do next. Even the GM can ask Richard to reference rules or do similar tasks that help them and the whole table. Maybe Richard should run the next game the group plays.

It's worth noting that this is not always a rules matter. Sometimes, it's a matter of a character's role or personality. "Well, you're the warrior, so you probably just charge in," Sarah might say to Keith. Or "Your character's dad was killed by a killer robot, so you hate this android." It's good to have developed a character who is so established, consistent, and believable that others can predict their actions, but deciding actions for you based on that knowledge is no different than telling you which mechanical option to use. It's usually even more easily solved too.

Players who do this often do so for two reasons: either they're attempting to reinforce stereotypes and clichés ("You're the mage, so you should stand in the back") or they're showing their appreciation for a well-played character. The first can be countered with "I'm playing a different kind of character than what you'd expect." The response to the second can be "Thanks, I'm glad you like my character, but let me narrate their actions—I might just surprise you." In both cases, the response is intriguing, and most players will want to watch what happens so they can know more.

THE POOR GM

Being a game master is hard, and it's not for everyone. So what do you do if you love your game group, but the GM isn't doing a very good job?

As with so many of these kinds of issues, first try to assess what's going on. Is the GM having a few off weeks? (Have you had good sessions or campaigns with them in the past?) If so, what often happens is most easily referred to as GM burnout. They're tired of running the game, and they've exhausted their creative well. Give them a break, and have someone else be the GM for a while. Put the campaign on hiatus. Make it clear that this isn't punishment or criticism. You legitimately want to give them a break, and look forward to getting back to the campaign when they're ready.

Maybe, though, they've never been a good GM. Signs of a poor GM include:

- ☹ Railroad adventures
- ☹ NPCs who are the main characters rather than the PCs, or who seem to exist only to show up the PCs
- ☹ Favoritism
- ☹ Mishandling of the rules on an ongoing basis (to the point where it causes problems)
- ☹ Poorly constructed adventures
- ☹ Awkward description
- ☹ Not respecting the players

No one example of any of those issues is enough to label someone a poor GM, but if they exhibit more than one and they seem unreceptive or unresponsive to constructive criticism or other feedback, it might be time to have a talk.

The easiest thing to do is have another eager GM waiting in the wings. "Maiysha is eager to start her Numenera campaign," you might say, and convince the GM to give someone else the role. Otherwise, you'll have to be honest and explain that you love having them as part of the group, but GMing might not be for them. Point out the feedback

you've been giving that hasn't seemed to change anything, and welcome them back as a player.

THE POOR PLAYER

Most of the time, a poor player is going to exhibit one of the problems that's already been covered. They're habitually late. They refuse to learn the rules. They act as a rules lawyer.

The problem intensifies if a single player exhibits more than one of these behaviors. This is particularly true if you try to reason with them and explain why it's a problem and talking hasn't helped.

As described in the section on a player who is a bad fit, you need to break up with them. (Unless it's the rare case of a great GM who is a poor player. If that's the issue, just get them back in the GM's chair.) Present the reasons with specific examples so you make your position clear. "You're just annoying everyone" doesn't help them grow, and it only encourages them to get defensive. See page 199 for more on a player who is a bad fit.

CHARACTER DEATH

I purposefully saved a tough subject for last. In games where you keep track of a character's health in some fashion, there's almost certainly a chance that they will die. In some games, that chance is far higher.

Death in an RPG is significant first and foremost because it means that player has to stop playing. We're all sitting at the table to play the game, and if something says that you have to stop, that can be a problem.

Death is also significant because players get attached to characters. This is a good thing. You want to be attached to your character. You want to have affection for them the way you would for a favored character in fiction. Losing them should be hard.

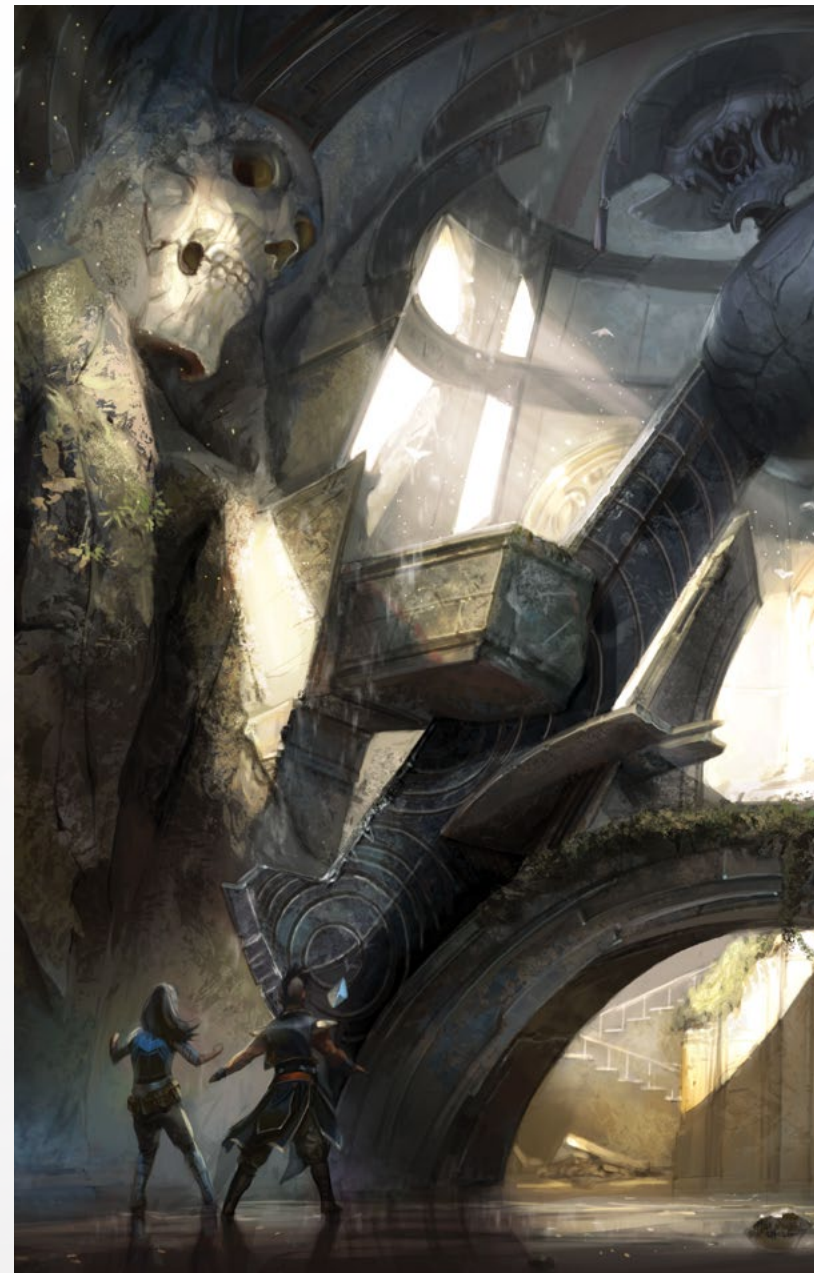
HAVE A POLICY

Your group should have a general policy about PC death, and everyone should be aware of it ahead of time. It's sort of a table rule, but often it's as much about the game world as the real world. As is so frequently the case, there are many ways to do this, with no right or wrong answers. Some options include the following.

- ☞ Death is permanent. No spells, alien artifacts, or surprising miracles will bring a dead character back. A player with a dead PC should create a new one.
- ☞ Death is not permanent. Magic or other wonders can bring characters back, and although it's not automatic, it's common enough that no player will be out of action from the game for very long.
- ☞ Death isn't permanent, but coming back is difficult and rare. A player can hope to see the return of a beloved character they lost, but it will significantly change the course of the campaign as the surviving PCs work to do what it takes to restore their friend (or the dead player goes through serious trials in the afterlife to win back their life, or whatever is appropriate to the campaign).
- ☞ Death is never random. A bad die roll never results in player death. Player death can happen only through poor choices. A roll suggesting that a character dies has some other effect instead (the PC is unconscious, debilitated, or the like).
- ☞ Death is up to the player. Characters don't die unless the player is okay with not playing their PC anymore.

RESTORED CHARACTERS

If a character does come back from the dead, what does that mean? Are they fully whole and intact? Are they debilitated in some way? Does death have a cost (does resurrection)? If characters returning from the dead is part of your game, you need to have answers to these questions. The game rules you're using might have some of these answers, or they



might not. If they do, be sure you're comfortable with them. This is a frequent area where groups develop house rules so they can all be happy (or at least not unhappy) with the results.

NEW CHARACTERS

A dead character probably means a player at the table with nothing to do. Either they play an NPC who happens to be nearby or handy, or they make up a new character.

The former option isn't ideal. The player will have little sense of attachment because it's not their character. Running an NPC is best used (if at all) as a stopgap until the dead character returns to life or the player makes a new one.

If the player creates a new character, it behooves the GM to work them in as quickly as possible. Elsewhere in this book, we examined ways to bring a new character into a campaign. But here are a few more questions that will need answers.

- ☞ Is the new character the same level or as advanced as the dead character?
- ☞ Does the new character have a similar amount of gear and wealth as the dead character?
- ☞ What happens to the dead character's belongings?
- ☞ How free is the player to use knowledge gained while playing the character who is now dead?

LETHAL GAMES

Some games are so lethal that the significance of death is diminished due to its frequency. In games like these, it can be a badge of honor to survive six sessions with the same character because death is so common.

These kinds of games absolutely require that the group has a policy for how to handle death, new characters, and getting them in quickly. The latter issue can be accomplished either by using a system where character creation takes only a few minutes or by having each player create multiple PCs so they have a fill-in or two (or five) ready to go.

Keep in mind that maintaining story continuity is difficult in these kinds of games. If no one has survived more than five sessions, that means no current character even knows what happened six sessions ago.

GRIEF

Grief over the loss of an RPG character is real. You don't have to diminish it or dismiss it. It's entirely valid to be a little sad when a character dies, even when you know full well that they're fictional. Grief doesn't mean you're out of touch with reality. On the contrary, it just means you had real emotional attachment, and that's not a bad thing at all.

Allow the player whose beloved character died a little time to grieve. Don't make jokes about it or marginalize their pain. They won't need weeks or even days, but give them a few minutes or maybe an hour.

TAKING TIME TO SHOW RESPECT

Sometimes in RPGs we gloss over the effects of death in the story, but that's not entirely believable and means missing out on great narrative opportunities. If a character dies, talk about how that impacts the survivors. Have a funeral in the story. Track down their next of kin. Build a memorial. Do something to recognize that the characters in the group are very likely close friends and would react as people who have lost someone significant in their lives.

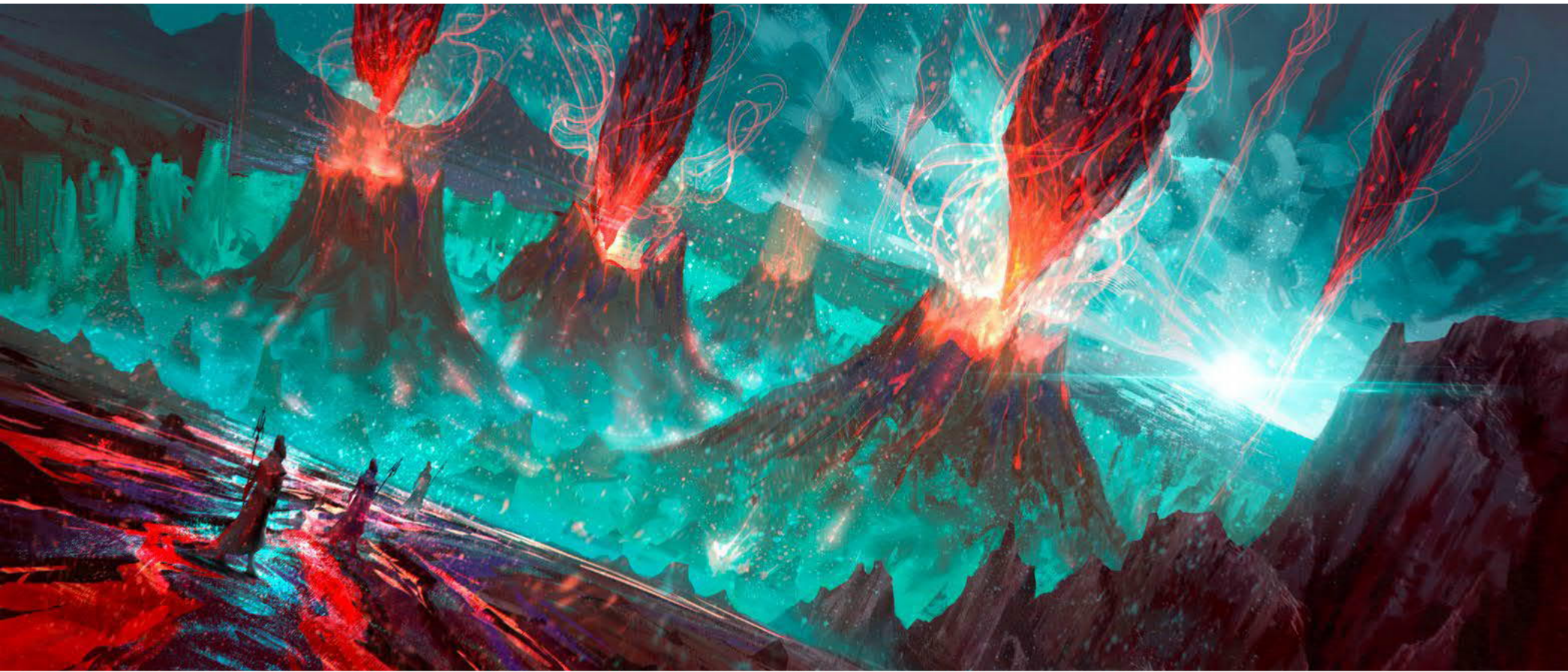
DEATH IN A CASUAL GAME

If you're playing a proverbial beer-and-pretzels game, don't worry about the emotional aspects of death. As with the suggestions above, if death will be taken casually, that's precisely the kind of thing players need to know ahead of time.

If a PC dies, whip together a new character and toss them into the fray. It's a casual game, so you don't need to care about the character's backstory or the hows and whys of where this new person came from. Just get the player back in the game as quickly as possible and enjoy.



BACK MATTER



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RECIPES

Gaming and food go together like dragons and piles of treasure. Here are some ideas for snacks, dishes, and drinks you can prepare for your group. Remember that it shouldn't always be the responsibility of the host to also provide the food. All of these ideas are pretty easily transportable.

BETTER THAN A BAG OF CHIPS

There's nothing wrong with a bag of chips and a bottle of soda at the gaming table—it's easy, it's classic, and almost no one can say no to noshing salt and swilling caffeine while dungeon delving. But if you want to put a little more work into your offerings, the recipes in this section are for you. All require a handful of ingredients, take minimal prep time, and are sure to please even the pickiest of players.

Check the What You Need list ahead of time, because in addition to ingredients, we've listed the kitchen items (oven, aluminum foil, etc.) that you'll want to have on hand so you're never caught unprepared.

If you're looking for something a little more snazzy or have solid kitchen skills that you want to test out, check out the Delicious Adventures section (page 234), where you'll find themed recipes for your fantasy, science fiction, horror, and post-apocalyptic games.

DELVE DIP

This vegetarian dish is so flexible and fast that you can make it with almost anything you have in your fridge.

Time: a few minutes

What You Need:

- 🍷 2 cups plain yogurt, mayonnaise, sour cream, or a mix
- 🍷 1.5 cups chopped fresh herbs of choice: chives, parsley, tarragon, dill, mint, basil
- 🍷 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 🍷 1 clove chopped garlic
- 🍷 salt and pepper
- 🍷 olive oil (optional)
- 🍷 chips, veggies, pretzels, or any other dippable
- 🍷 blender or food processor, serving bowl

What You Do:

1. Put all ingredients in a blender or food processor and blend or pulse until smooth. If mixture is too thick, add a bit of olive oil.
2. Taste. Add more of this and that until you love it.
3. Put it in a serving bowl, with your dippables on the side.

Tips: This is really easy to make ahead of time. Just pull it out of the fridge and give it a stir when you're ready. If you make the dip, you can ask everyone else to bring their favorite dippable.



D20 ROLL(UPS)

These are so easy and addicting that you might end up eating them even when it isn't game night. You can fill them with bacon and cheese, ham and olives, or go full-on veggie—or do a bit of each to suit every palate.

Time: 15 minutes or so, depending on how much you need to chop

What You Need:

- 🍴 Flour tortillas
- 🍴 Cream cheese (softened or whipped)
- 🍴 Fillings of choice (bacon, ham, turkey, salmon, cheese, lettuce, tomatoes, mushrooms, peppers, olives, and so on)
- 🍴 Salsa, guacamole, hummus, delve dip, or other favorite dip
- 🍴 Bowl, knife

What You Do:

1. Lay out the tortillas, and spread cream cheese on one side.
2. Add your fillings of choice.
3. Roll up tightly. Cover and chill for a couple of hours (or overnight).
4. When you're ready to serve, cut the rolls into bite-sized slices.

Tips: You can use flavored wraps (like spinach or roasted red pepper) if you want to add some color and a hint more flavor. Don't overfill the tortillas, or you won't be able to wrap them tight enough for them to keep their shape.

MAGICAL WHIP (& DIP)

You don't have to tell anyone at your table that this dip is kind of healthy. Just whip up a batch and watch it magically disappear.

Time: 5 minutes

What You Need:

- 🍴 1 part peanut butter (smooth or creamy)
- 🍴 1 part plain yogurt
- 🍴 Honey to taste
- 🍴 Apples, pretzels, or other dippables
- 🍴 Bowl, something to stir with

What You Do:

1. Whip the peanut butter and yogurt together until creamy.
2. Add the honey slowly until it tastes the way you'd like.
3. Serve room temperature or chilled.

Tips: You can use vanilla yogurt for a sweeter dip, and adjust the ratio of peanut butter and yogurt to suit your tastes. If you want something more like a dessert, top with chocolate chips and serve with sugar cookies and strawberries.

SALTY MEATY GOODNESS

There were a lot of options on what to call these, but this name pretty much says it all. You can make them a little ahead of time if you want (they're almost as good cold as they are right out of the oven), or you can talk your players into helping you wrap these morsels.

Time: half an hour, tops

What You Need:

- 🍴 Bacon
- 🍴 Parmesan cheese
- 🍴 Club crackers (or your favorite buttery cracker of choice—square or rectangular crackers are best)
- 🍴 Oven, baking sheet, aluminum foil, spatula, oven mitts

What You Do:

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F.
2. Line a baking sheet with aluminum foil.
3. Put a bit of parmesan cheese on each cracker, and then wrap the bacon carefully and a bit snugly around the cheese and cracker (it should hold the parmesan cheese onto the cracker).
4. Place the wrapped crackers on the baking sheet without touching and bake for 20 minutes, until the bacon is done and the crackers look a bit crispy on the edges.
5. Allow to cool until you don't burn your tongue, then serve.

Tips: The most important thing is to keep an eye on these starting at about 15 minutes, because they can go from brown to burnt quickly if you're not paying attention. If you see the edges start to look crispy and brown, go ahead and pull them out even if it's been less than 20 minutes.

DELICIOUS ADVENTURES

Sometimes your game deserves a little something extra. These recipes—designed with some of your favorite genres in mind—can add that special touch to every game.

FANTASY

Fantasy seems to lend itself well to food and drink.

YOU ALL MEAT (AND CHEESE) IN A TAVERN

At some point, every fantasy game starts (or ends) in a tavern. A ploughman's-style dinner makes a quick and easy meal for busy adventurers. You can even ask each player to bring something to add to the meal.

What You Need:

Some or all of the following:

- ☞ Meats
- ☞ Cheeses
- ☞ Grapes, pears, apples, and other fruit
- ☞ Nuts
- ☞ Pickles
- ☞ Eggs
- ☞ Chutney
- ☞ Crusty bread

What You Do:

Put everything in rustic dishes and set it on the table. Feel free to tear the bread, break the cheese into hunks, and use cloth napkins to complete the feel.

MAGIC USER

This purple-hued drink is reminiscent of evil queens, dark magic, and poisoned potions.

What You Need:

- ☞ 1 1/2 parts vodka
- ☞ 1 part blue Curaçao
- ☞ 1 part sweet and sour mix
- ☞ 1 part grenadine
- ☞ 1 part cranberry or cran-grape juice

What You Do:

1. Combine everything together in a shaker with ice, and shake.
2. Fill glasses with ice, then strain the drink over the ice.

Tips:

- ☞ Using cran-grape juice makes the drink a darker purple, but if you prefer the taste of cranberry, you can try adding a little extra blue Curaçao to get the color right.
- ☞ You can rim the glasses with purple sugar—just pour the sugar on a plate, wet the rim of the glass, and dip it in the sugar. Then fill.

Fun Drink Tips and Tricks

- ☞ Edible glitter turns any cocktail into something special. It comes in a variety of colors and can be mixed into almost anything without altering the flavor.
- ☞ Ice cubes in unique shapes add a touch of interest to any drink. For a real impact, try a large orb, colored cubes (using juice or food coloring), or cubes with fruit or candy frozen in them. If ice cubes really excite you, check out LED “ice” cubes, which come in a variety of colors and shapes.
- ☞ Tonic water makes drinks glow in the dark under a black light. You can even make tonic water ice cubes (half tonic, half water works best, unless you’re making actual gin and tonics).
- ☞ You can turn any drink, no matter how simple, into something awesome and theme-relevant just by using the right glassware. Serve drinks in beakers and test tubes for a laboratory or sci fi feel. Blood-red glasses make any concoction seem horrific, while tankards and steins say, “You all meet up in a bar . . .”
- ☞ The above is also true regarding garnishes. Gummy eyeballs, chili pepper horns, licorice whip spiders, or even store-bought stir sticks in appropriate shapes (insects, keys, funny animals) all add something extra to even the simplest drink.

SCIENCE FICTION

You don't have to travel to the future to get food and drink that makes it seem like you did.

CYBERPUNK STREET NOODLES

What's a sci fi story without street noodles? This quick and easy recipe can be served in minutes, and you can have players bring their favorite finger foods to add to the ambiance.

What You Need:

- ☞ 1 box of noodles of your choice
- ☞ 1/4 cup soy sauce
- ☞ 2 tablespoons rice vinegar
- ☞ 2 tablespoons sesame oil
- ☞ 2 tablespoons brown sugar
- ☞ 1/4 teaspoon ground ginger
- ☞ Red pepper flakes (to taste)
- ☞ Hot sauce (to taste)
- ☞ 1 tablespoon minced garlic
- ☞ Eggs (fresh or hard boiled)

What You Do:

1. Whisk together the soy sauce, vinegar, sesame oil, sugar, ginger, red pepper, hot sauce, and garlic.
2. Cook the noodles.
3. Fry the eggs (or cut, if hard boiled).
4. Mix noodles and sauce together.
5. Serve the noodles topped with eggs.

Tips:

- ☞ You can use any long noodles, such as lo mein, chow mein, ramen, or soba.
- ☞ If you want to get fancy, add cooked vegetables, tofu, chicken, or shrimp.
- ☞ Chopsticks come in a variety of shapes, including weapons, dinosaurs, and aliens.

GREEN GOO

This drink is bright green, sure to remind players of alien innards, bioluminescent monsters, and far-future spaceship dashboards.

What You Need:

- ☞ 3 parts something orange
- ☞ 1 part something blue
- ☞ 1 freshly squeezed lime
- ☞ 3 parts something bubbly

What You Do:

Pour each ingredient over ice, in a glass that shows off just how green and goeey the drink is.

Tips: A simple way to make this is to use orange juice, blue Curaçao, lime, and ginger ale, but you can mix and match a variety of different ingredients and still come out with a drink that looks like green goo and tastes way better. For more of a kick, replace the ginger ale with a bubbly alcohol. For less, use a non-alcoholic blue Curaçao or any blue fruity beverage.





HORROR

Horror food and drinks should be disturbing, but still tasty!

MONSTROUS MAC AND CHEESE

A handful of spinach and a drop of green food coloring can turn plain mac and cheese into a tasty toxic sludge, a bowl of monster brains, or any other gross element that fits into your horror game.

What You Need:

- 🍷 1/4 cup butter
- 🍷 1/3 cup flour
- 🍷 2 1/2 cups milk
- 🍷 Salt and pepper to taste
- 🍷 8 ounces shredded cheese mixture (such as cheddar, mozzarella, and parmesan)
- 🍷 Frozen or fresh spinach
- 🍷 Green food coloring
- 🍷 1 pound of dry pasta (weird shapes are great)

What You Do:

1. Melt butter in a large pan over medium-low heat.
2. Add the flour and combine. Simmer for a couple of minutes, stirring regularly.
3. Add milk and whisk until any lumps are gone. Let cook until it simmers.
4. As it's cooking, also cook the pasta.
5. Add cheese to the mixture, remove from heat, and stir until it's all melted.
6. Stir in spinach and add food coloring until it's as green as you'd like.
7. Mix pasta and cheese mixture.

Tips:

- 🍷 Using white cheese, such as white cheddar and mozzarella, makes your mac and cheese more of a true green, while yellow cheese tends to turn more neon green.
- 🍷 Gel food coloring typically gives you a brighter green.
- 🍷 You can find neat pasta in horror-themed shapes, like skulls, spiders, and monsters.
- 🍷 You can find bowls in the shape of coffins, witches' cauldrons, and garbage cans for the ultimate monstrous meal.

DEATH, SERVED COLD

These drinks are gorgeously gruesome (and tasty). You can easily substitute any red drink (including plain juice) and get a similar effect.

Drink—What You Need:

- ☞ 2 parts vodka
- ☞ 2 parts pomegranate or cranberry juice
- ☞ 2 parts orange juice
- ☞ Simple syrup to taste
- ☞ Freshly squeezed lime to taste

What You Do:

1. Pour all ingredients into a cocktail shaker with ice.
2. Rim the glasses (see below).
3. Strain the drinks into the rimmed glasses.

Rim—What You Need:

- ☞ 1 cup sugar
- ☞ 1/2 cup water
- ☞ 1/2 cup corn syrup
- ☞ Red food coloring

What You Do:

1. Boil the sugar, water, and syrup over medium-high heat for 15 or 20 minutes (the temperature should be about 300 degrees F and the mixture should be thick).
2. Take it off the heat and stir in the food coloring.
3. Once it cools a little, dip the glasses in the mixture. The coloring will drip down the glass to create a bloodline effect.

Tips:

- ☞ Gel food coloring typically gives brighter colors.
- ☞ Be sure not to use plastic glasses, as the sugar mixture will melt the plastic.
- ☞ You can use other colors to get different looks. Green looks like ooze, while blue has a watery feel.



POST-APOCALYPTIC

For an extra hint of immersion, serve this food and drink in mismatched or even broken or cracked dishes (sometimes a trip to the secondhand store makes this easy and pretty inexpensive).

ROOT CELLAR STEW

This soup has a rustic, down-to-earth flavor and is easy to make. The great thing is that it's hard to mess up. You can throw in pretty much whatever veggies and herbs you happen to have on hand, just like you would after the apocalypse.

What You Need:

- 🍷 3 pounds of boneless chuck roast or other stew meat, cubed
- 🍷 1/3 cup flour
- 🍷 1 tablespoon salt
- 🍷 1 teaspoon pepper
- 🍷 3 cloves garlic, diced
- 🍷 2 medium onions, diced
- 🍷 4 red potatoes, peeled and diced
- 🍷 4 large carrots, chopped
- 🍷 3 stalks celery, chopped
- 🍷 8 ounces mushroom, quartered
- 🍷 4 cups beef broth
- 🍷 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 🍷 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 🍷 2 tablespoons herbs (such as thyme, paprika, and rosemary)
- 🍷 1 bag frozen peas
- 🍷 Loaf of sourdough bread

What You Do:

1. Toss the meat in the flour, salt, and pepper. Then brown it in a skillet on high heat. Remove from pan.
2. Add garlic and onions and cook until they are translucent.
3. In a crockpot, layer the potatoes, carrots, celery, meat, garlic, onions, and mushrooms. Add the broth, vinegar, tomato paste, and dried herbs.
4. Cook on low for at least 8 hours (it's fine to let it go longer)
5. Hollow out the sourdough bread to make a bowl.
6. About ten minutes before serving, stir in the bag of frozen peas and any fresh herbs.

Tips:

- 🍷 The thicker the better for this stew, as anything with too much moisture will soak into the bread.
- 🍷 You can easily serve this in individual loaves or large rolls.
- 🍷 You can also serve it in mismatched bowls and mugs with a hearty bread on the side.

CROUNGE HOUND

This drink looks like you made it with stuff you just found lying around, but it tastes way better.

What You Need:

- 🍷 2 parts rye bourbon
- 🍷 1 part honey simple syrup
- 🍷 1/2 squeezed lemon
- 🍷 Pinch of cayenne pepper
- 🍷 Fresh herbs, such as rosemary or basil
- 🍷 Scotch to float on top

What You Do:

1. Shake everything except scotch in a cocktail shaker with ice.
2. Strain into a mason jar.
3. Slowly pour scotch over the finished drink.
4. Garnish with twist of lemon peel and a sprig of fresh herbs.



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