

The Literary Edge

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Role-playing games changed forever the first time a player said, "I know it's the best strategy, but my character wouldn't *do* that." Suddenly an aesthetic concern had been put ahead of a gaming one, i.e. establishing characterization over a scenario's "victory conditions." At that unheralded moment, role-playing stopped being a game at all and began quietly evolving into a narrative art form, a junior cousin of drama, film, and literature.

OTE is, among other things, an attempt to further the development of RPing as art. GMs will find it fruitful to approach decisions as an artist creating a collaborative work with players. The idea of collaboration is important; the GM is not a "storyteller" with the players as the audience, but merely a "first among equals" given responsibility for the smooth progress of the developing story.

The closest analogue to RPing is improvised theater, in which actors invent scenes as they go along. Participants must be receptive to the contributions of others and use their own input to build on them. The Prime Directive of the improviser is "never negate," which means that the actors must accept all ideas as they come up and work with them.

In RPing, however, the GM is often called on to say "no" to players' desires for their characters; this is because roleplaying games are ongoing epics centered around the adventure genre rather than brief comedy skits. The GM is responsible for decisions about characters' successes in the physical world, and will often decide that attempts at given actions fail. After all, stories in which the leads breeze over every obstacle without opposition are undramatic and therefore fail to entertain.

But GMs should also be prepared to say "yes" to players when a suggestion inspires new possibilities for the storyline. In fact, a good GM will work to incorporate player input into his plans. In drama, character is the most important thing, and this element belongs to the players. The GM is not a movie director, able to order actors to interpret a script a given way. Instead, he should be seeking ways to challenge PCs, to use plot developments to highlight aspects of their character, in hopes of being challenged in return. GMCs should not be developed in a vacuum, but conceived to interact with the central characters, the PCs, in illuminating ways. Some GMCs will be foils, allies whose personalities reflect those of the PCs; others will be antagonists, more starkly contrasting types who oppose them.

Think of all your actions as GM as literary devices. When you decide what the weather is, make it reflect the mood of the PCs -- or, just as effective, contrast with it. Pace the story so that it has the speed of an exciting movie, with fast-moving action sequences interspersed with slower, subtler ones that develop the PCs; making them seem more real and sympathetic. End sessions with rip-roaring climaxes (these can be emotional climaxes, not just fight scenes) and cliffhangers.

When viewing RPing as an art form, rather than a game, it becomes less important to keep from the players things their characters wouldn't know. When characters separate, you can "cut" back and forth between scenes involving different characters, making each PC the focus of his own individual sub-plot. This technique has several benefits. First, it allows players to develop characters towards their goals without having to subsume them to the demands of the "party" as a whole. Secondly, it quickens the pace, allowing players to think while their characters are "off-screen," cutting down on dead time in which players thrash over decisions. When a character reaches an impasse, or an important climax, the GM can then "cut" to another character, giving the first player a chance to mentally regroup. Finally, the device is entertaining for players out of the spotlight, allowing them to sit back and enjoy the adventures of others' characters.

The price of this is allowing players access to information known to PCs other than their own. But it's simple enough to rule out of play any actions they attempt based on forbidden knowledge. This doesn't mean there will be a shortage of mystery. Any OTE GM will still have secrets to spare. In fact, by allowing the number of subplots to increase, the GM is introducing even more questions the players will look forward to seeing answered.

GMs who employ this multi-plotting device will find it changes the nature of PC interaction, making meetings between them more remarkable and meaningful as they become rarer. Now PCs will interact because they want to for reasons arising from the story, not merely because they have to as part of a team. After all, parties of adventurers in roleplaying sessions are often made up of wildly disparate types who would never ally with each other, except for reasons outside the storyline: the players all want to be included, and the GM has one plotline prepared, so they all get shoehorned together. Often the result is much time diverted to strains within the artificially-formed party, or damage to the willing suspension of disbelief. With the "cutting" device in play, PCs can briefly team up, oppose one another, or simply never meet. (Clever GMs will, however, be alert to opportunities to make separate storylines cross over -- since the PCs are the developed, complex focus figures, encounters between them will tend to curry a high degree of emotional impact.) If PCs do choose to form a stable "party" spontaneously, it will be a stronger one, with fewer strains that lead to tedious intra-party feuding.

For years, role-players have been simulating fictional narratives the way wargamers recreate historical military engagements. They've been making spontaneous, democratized art for their own consumption, even if they haven't seen it in these terms. Making the artistry conscious is a liberating act, making it easier to emulate the classic tales that inspire us. Have fun with it, and enjoy your special role in aesthetics history -- it's not everybody who gets to be a pioneer in the development of a new art form.
