Game Angry

How to RPG the Angry Way

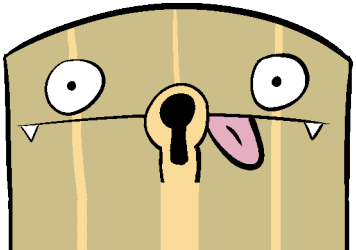
Learn to play fantasy role-playing games

Run your first *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Pathfinder* game

Improve your GMing skills and run ~~great~~ less worse games

By Scott "The Angry GM" Rehm

Illustrated by Jon Mosley



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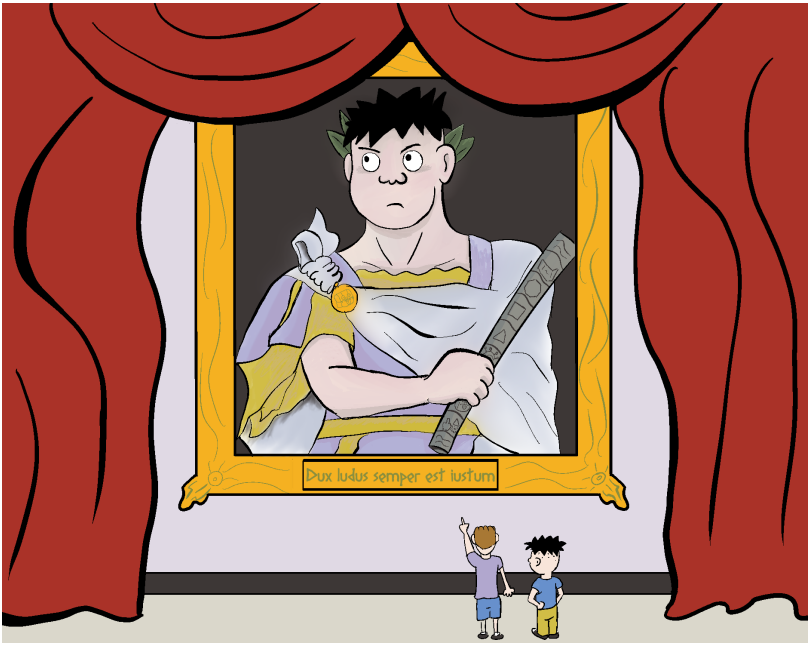

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To Dad
Who taught me to love games
And to work hard

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About the Names in this Book

Throughout this book, I provide numerous, helpful examples of the sort of inane borderline insanity that passes for typical gamer behavior. The example incidents have been fabricated, but the names are real. All of those names were supplied by my most generous Kickstarter backers. Except for the name Buttz Awesomelaser. I take full responsibility for that one.

I'd like to thank the following supporters for supplying me with character names to use and abuse.

Arthur Russakoff (Belver)

Brad Saxon (Gax't the Goblin Warlock)

Braxton "Megamon" Anderson (Leroy the Goblin Rogue Formerly Known as 42)

Brendan McGhan (Tryss Morthos)

Christopher Kiraly (Dane Spellbinder)

Dan Moser (Caeldin Sunspear)

Daniel (Zantar Thromin)

Epoch Wolf (Juniper)

Euan Reid (Tony Maring)

Ian Jensen (Argylefraster Periwinkle)

Joseph Markee (Sävis)

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Nick Bourke (Brimsor)

Shannon R. Bell (Shawn Salmonbane)

Tijmen van der Kemp (Azil)

And thanks also to O.Z., whose name inspired Zarole Skyi

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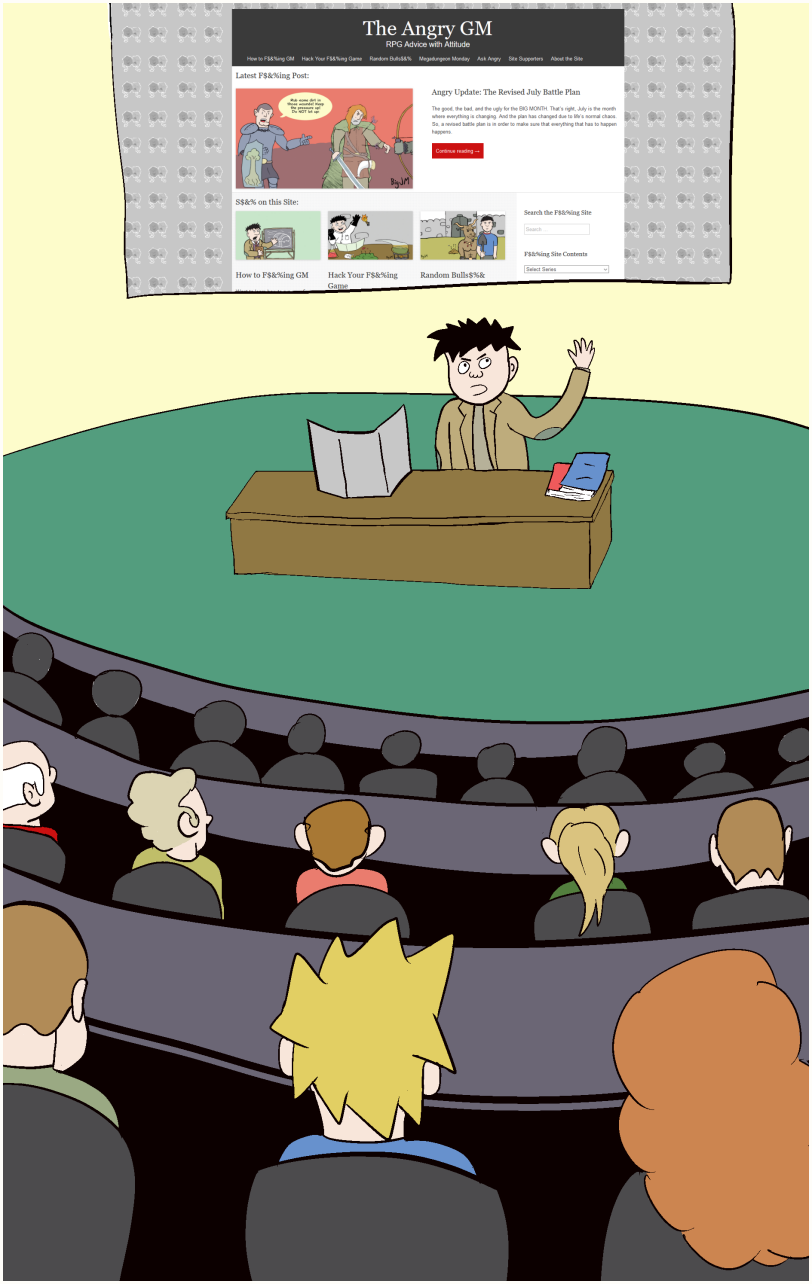
Introduction



Let me tell you about the best games I've ever played. And still play. They're called table-top role-playing games. Big, dull name, right? And you might never have heard of them. But, maybe you have heard of role-playing games — RPGs — before. Maybe you are familiar with video games like *Final Fantasy* and *The Elder Scrolls*. Or big, multiplayer MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft*. These days, they call every other video game released a role-playing game. But that's not what I'm talking about.

The RPGs I'm talking about aren't video games. You can play online, but you can also play at a real table with real, actual humans that you can actually see and touch. They aren't board games either. Not exactly. The games I am talking about are much better. Better than board games. Better than video games.

Now, even if you haven't heard of RPGs as a thing before, you may have heard the names of some actual games. Games like *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder*. Especially *Dungeons & Dragons*. Lots of people have heard of it, even though most people have no idea what it's about or how to play. You might see people playing D&D on YouTube. Or you might see it played on some TV show. I don't know what you kids are watching these days, but is *Big Bang Theory* still on TV? Can you still see *Stranger Things* on Netflix? I don't know. I'm old. The first time I saw a role-playing game on a screen, it was in a movie about an intergalactic goblin. It loved Reese's Pieces and built an intergalactic communicator out of a Speak N' Spell. Do you have any idea what I'm talking about?

It's not important.

What is important is that RPGs are games of fantastic action and adventure. A bunch of players — the heroes — take on the roles of warriors and wizards and barbarians and thieves. They embark on exciting quests to rescue beautiful dragons from evil, fire-breathing princesses. Or to throw bits of jewelry into smoldering volcanoes to destroy an evil kingdom and save a good one. Stuff like that. And, unlike video games, there aren't any limits. You won't hop up a cliff face for six hours to discover some programmer stuck an invisible wall at the top to cover the fact they didn't program anything on the other side of the mountain. You won't get blocked by a freaking twig because your character can't jump over it. And, when you fight it out with a savage orc and get the clever idea to throw sand in its eyes as a distraction, so you can stab it in whatever orcs have instead of kidneys, you can do that, too. Whatever you can think of, you can attempt to do. It's like you are a part of the game world.

How is that possible? Well, I could say it's all through the magic of "imagination." But you didn't buy a book by a guy named The Angry Game Master to hear that kind of crap. Instead, it is possible because role-playing games use open-ended rule sets that

simulate almost anything you can imagine. And the rules aren't that complicated. But it isn't the rules that are important. RPGs also use a special, amazing, brilliant, creative, clever, charismatic person to keep it running smooth. That person is the Game Master. The GM. Every RPG needs one. And that person — that noble, selfless soul — gathers the players, creates the game, lays out the quests, provides the challenges, portrays the villains, and dares the heroic players to survive. If they're good enough. Otherwise, they can always start over with new heroes.

I've been a Game Master for 30 years. Maybe longer. Depends on when you're reading this book. Check the copyright date and do the math. I've been creating and running amazing adventures for friends, family, kids, adults, strangers, and weird randos on the Internet pretty much constantly for those three decades. Well, not the Internet. Because we didn't have the Internet when I got started. But that's why I'm called Game Master.

Why am I called Angry? Well, there are two reasons. First, it's the name my parents gave me. Apparently, I was not the nicest baby. Second, I'm Angry because I love these games.

Crazy?

Well, the thing is, the people who make these games — companies like Wizards of the Coast and Paizo and Fantasy Flight Games — the people who make these amazing games also make it so freaking hard for people like you to get started. There's dozens of rules systems, hundreds of books, and thousands of accessories. And every last book is long and boring and dull. The people who design these games make them seem so complicated. So confusing. So overwhelming. And because of that, whenever I tell anyone I play games like Dungeons & Dragons, they always say the same thing. They say, "That game always seemed cool. I always wanted to try it, but I had no idea how."

And I just want to scream. I want to grab them and scream "IT IS COOL, AND IT ISN'T COMPLICATED! IT'S PRETTY MUCH THE MOST FUN YOU CAN HAVE WITH YOUR FRIENDS! AND YOU'RE MISSING OUT BECAUSE THE IDIOTS THAT MAKE THE GAMES DON'T KNOW HOW TO EXPLAIN THEM! ARGH!"

Look, it's almost impossible to figure out what to buy and how to get started. And these games seem big and complicated. But they aren't. Not really. You just need someone to show you the ropes. Which is why I wrote this book.

This book will tell you how role-playing games work. It will tell you how to play them, how to start running them, and how to run them well so that your friends keep coming back for more. That's what it's called, by the way, when a Game Master gets a bunch of

friends together for a game of *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Pathfinder* or any other role-playing game. It's called *running the game*. Okay?

Anyway, this book is for Game Masters of any level of experience. If you've never played a role-playing game and have no idea how they work or how to get started, keep reading. **Part I: The World of Role-Playing Games** is for you.

But maybe you know what RPGs are. Either because you read Part I, because you've played a few games with some other Game Master, or because you've bought one of the many games out there. Maybe you're ready to run a game of your own for some of your friends. Skip ahead to **Part II: Getting Your (First) Game On** to find out how to run your first game. Obviously.

Maybe you're already a Game Master, though. Maybe because you read Part II and followed my advice. Or maybe you've run a few games on your own. Maybe more than a few. If you want to be a true Game MASTER, check out **Part III: Running Less Worse Games**.

Beyond that, if you want access to more brilliant gaming advice and custom content, visit *TheAngryGM.com* for more RPG Advice with Attitude. Yeah. I made up that tagline myself.

Anyway, enough introductions. Let's talk gaming.

Part I:

The World of Role-Playing Games

Chapter 1:

A Fantasy Adventure Story Starring You

What is a role-playing game? That's the question you are probably asking yourself right now. Especially if you read the introduction. And if you didn't read the introduction, go back and read it. I didn't write it for fun. It's there for a reason.

I'll wait.

Done? Good.

So, you're wondering what a role-playing game actually is. What the heck is *Dungeons & Dragons*? *Pathfinder*? How do these RPG things work? Well, the answer is simple: a role-playing game, an RPG, is a fantasy adventure story that's all about you. Well, you and your friends. If you have some. You're the heroes of the story. You face obstacles and challenges and decide how to overcome them. If you navigate the challenges, you complete the quest and celebrate your victory. If you don't, you probably die. But just in the game. Don't worry, this isn't one of those "die in the game, die in real life things." That doesn't happen.

As for how RPGs work? Well, look, you don't want to read a long, complicated explanation. As I said in the introduction you definitely read, I'm solving the problem of long, complicated, boring, and confusing. Not adding to it. So, I've got something better than a long explanation…

Let's Play a Game

Yes. We're going to play an RPG. Right now. You're going to need something to write a few notes on. A piece of paper will do. And you're going to need something to write with. And you're going to need some dice. Three of them. Grab them from any board game you've got lying around. If you know anything about RPGs already, you might know they use unusual dice. But I want you to grab three normal, six-sided, cubic dice with little dots on them. Okay?

No. Seriously. Go get that stuff. I'm not kidding. It's audience participation time. Go.

Okay. Ready?

A long time ago, during a forgotten age of history, kings and queens, knights and wizards ruled the world. Beyond the castle walls, beyond the villages and farms, the world was wild and dangerous. Vicious goblins dwelled deep in the dark forests. Dragons soared amongst the towering mountain peaks. Demons hid in the dark, shadowy cracks in reality. Mad necromancers raised armies of skeletons from hoary graveyards, and terrible, oozing horrors slithered through the ruins of ancient kingdoms. That world is your world.

That's the world you live in. You might be a farmer's son or daughter in some tiny village. You might be trained to use your bow to protect the sheep from wolves and marauding goblins. Or you might be a knight serving in a lord's keep, trained with sword and shield to defend the weak and uphold justice. You could be a cutthroat rogue, raised on the dung-crusted streets of a sprawling city, surviving by your wits and cunning. You might even be a magician, trained by some gruff, impatient master to bend reality to your will with a few arcane words and gestures. Really, you might be anyone.

Take a minute to think about who you'd like to be in this world. Just make sure you're someone who can handle danger. Because the frontier is dangerous. And you're about to head out into it.

Did you say, "knight in shining armor?" Well, here's the problem. If we were playing the game for real, you could come up with any answer you wanted. Within reason. But we're not. This is just a book. I can't hear and respond to your answers. So, let's pretend you said "knight."

In an RPG, you usually start by creating a character. Your character is the person you're going to be in the game. And you have a lot of choices to make. Some are just descriptive. What's your name? What do you look like? How do you act? Other choices have an actual impact on the game. What is your character good at? Bad at? What useful stuff are they carrying? As you invent your character, you record all of this information on a **character sheet**.

Pretty much the first two things you decide in most RPGs are your character's race and class. **Race** is the RPG term for your ancestry. What type of creature are you? Are you human or something else? In fantasy games like this one, you might be an elf, a dwarf, an orc, or something even more fantastic. **Class** is a very broad term that describes what your character does and what they're good at. In fantasy games, you might have classes like warrior, hunter, wizard, rogue, priest, barbarian, warlock, druid, and more. There might be more exotic choices in some games. Perhaps a samurai or monk or swashbuckler or alchemist or gunslinger. Different games offer different options.

Remember that piece of paper? That is your character sheet. Since you chose to be a knight, we're going to assign you a pretty simple race and class. You're a human fighter. You can write that down. Also, feel free to give your character a name. That's all you need for now. But leave plenty of room on your sheet.

And just one quick thing. Even though you're a knight in the service of some lord or lady, your class is called fighter. That's because your class is a generic game term that describes what abilities your character has and what they are good at. In this case, your character is good at fighting in heavy armor and using most weapons. Class doesn't describe who your character is in the world, it just describes what your character knows how to do.

You Must Choose, But Choose Wisely

Let's continue.

> *Adopted years ago, by Caeldin Sunspear of Brightmoor Castle, you never knew your real parents. You had a good life, but you trained hard. You learned to fight with sword and shield in hand, to ride horses, and to do both encased in heavy steel armor. You also received a good education. You learned to read and you learned the history of the realm and the Sunspear family. You trained in etiquette and the code of chivalry. You learned to be honorable, just, and to protect the weak and innocent. And to fight the forces of evil and chaos wherever you found them.*
>
> *How well you learned those lessons and how seriously you take your oaths? That's up to you.*
>
> *A few weeks ago, you rode out from Brightmoor Castle on orders to collect the month's tax payment from the mayor of a nearby village. You rode out, met the mayor, collected the payment, and turned back. Everything went fine. You've got a heavy sack of silver coins hanging from the saddle of your trusty steed. And then…*
>
> *You make camp for the night, two days from home and settle in. A crazed man bursts out of the bushes into the light of your campfire. He's toothless, with wild hair. His ragged clothes are crusted with filth. He's skinny to the point of starvation. All skin and bones. And he waves a heavy branch like a club. He knows who you are. He knows you have the village's tax money. And he demands you hand it over. What do you do?*

Think about it. What do you do? The man is no match for you. You could cut him down with one stroke of your blade. He did try to rob you. But is killing him honorable? Do you care? No one would even

miss him. No one would ever know what you did. And it's not like you can just give away the villager's taxes. The man does seem crazy enough to fight you even though he obviously can't win.

What do you do? Think fast. He's coming right at you! You're not in any danger, but if he starts fighting, you have to fight back. You've run out of time! Do you have an answer? What's your choice?

CONGRATULATIONS! You're a role-player. It's official. You did it. You role-played. And I didn't make it easy for you. That's an ugly situation you're in.

Seriously. This is what a role-playing game is all about. It isn't everything, though. It's just the foundation. A **role-playing game** is about **playing** a **role** in the story. YOU are a character in the world. YOU find yourself in a situation. YOU decide what to do based on the role you're playing. And then, YOU see what happens. It's all about YOU and the choices YOU make. And this isn't some multiple choice, dialogue tree thing. It's not a video game. You have total freedom of choice.

For example, maybe you grab the crazy guy's branch and wrestle him to the ground. What then? Maybe you try to calm him down. Maybe you offer him some food. You could hit him in the head, knock him out, and tie him up. Or you could knock him out and leave him there with some food and money and ride way. Or you could talk him into sitting down with you and sharing your food. You might even offer to take him back to Brightmoor Castle so he can get cleaned up and work in the stables. Whatever clever plan you come up with, we play it out and see what happens.

Checking Your Abilities

Unfortunately, this is still a book and I'm still not there. So, I'll just have to guess what you do for now.

> *Raising your hands to show that you're unarmed, you invite the crazed man to sit down and share your meal. He hesitates, but the smell of pheasant roasting over the fire overtakes him. He sits down and starts cramming chunks of meat into his mouth. He gulps down the water you offer him, too. After the meal, you manage to get him talking.*

He explains that he lived on a farm to the east with his family. One day, foul goblins came out of the forest and attacked the farm. They killed his livestock, stole what they could, and burned the rest. Only he and his son survived. Furious, they tracked the goblins into the forest. They found an ancient, ruined tower. In the cellar of the tower, the goblins ambushed them. He got away, but he has no idea what happened to his son. The man has been wandering ever since, trying to keep himself alive. As he finishes his story he begins to weep, overcome with the anguish of losing his family and everything he had.

Hopefully, you are moved by this story to take action. Even if your sense of duty and the man's terrible story aren't enough to motivate you (you monster), goblins are notorious raiders and thieves. That means they usually have lots of stolen treasure in their lairs. There, that should get you moving. Either way, we're going to assume you followed the man's directions to the old tower in the forest.

But, there's a problem. The crumbling tower is there, just as the man described, but there's only one way in: a heavy wooden door. And the goblins have barricaded it from the inside. You're going to have to force it open.

Again, I'm making a lot of choices for you here. You might want to scout around for another way in. Or climb to an upper floor of the tower. Or just turn around and go home. Instead, we're going to pretend that you want to smash the door down.

The other part of a role-playing game is figuring out whether your choices actually work out the way you want. That is, figuring out whether you succeed at what you're trying to do. To see if you can actually bust open the door, we need to know your abilities.

In this game, you have six **abilities** representing your basic physical and mental capabilities. **Strength** measures how physically strong you are. **Dexterity** measures your agility, reflexes, and coordination. **Constitution** measures your health and stamina. **Intelligence** measures your ability to think, learn, and remember facts. **Wisdom** measures your awareness, intuition, and willpower. And **Charisma** measures the strength of your personality. How confident you are and whether people listen to you.

Each ability has an **ability score** between 1 and 20. A score of 1 is terrible. An ant has Strength 1. A score of 20 is amazing. Albert Einstein and I both have Intelligence 20. Most people have scores between 9 and 12 for each ability. That's average.

Every ability also has an **ability modifier**. The higher the score, the better the modifier. If you have a Strength 16 — which is pretty high — you have a **Strength modifier** of +3. If you're a little clumsy and have Dexterity 8, you have a **Dexterity modifier** of -1.

And that's you. You're very strong, but a little uncoordinated. Don't worry about the rest of them right now. Just write these down.

Strength: *16 (+3)*
Dexterity: *8 (-1)*

Okay, now we can see if you bust down the door. That requires some brute force. To represent brute force, we look at your Strength. Now, pick up your three dice, roll them all, and add them together. Then, add your Strength modifier to the total. That's called an **ability check**. Specifically, it's a **Strength check**. **Whenever you try to do anything in the game we figure out what ability it involves. Then roll the dice and add the ability modifier.** Or subtract it if it's negative. The modifier modifies the die roll. See?

So, roll your Strength check. How did you do? Did you succeed?

Oh, right, you don't know. You know what you rolled, but you don't know what it means. That's because you don't know how difficult it is to break down the door. Every check has a **Difficulty Class**, a **DC**, that describes your chances of success. An easy task has a DC of 5. Hard tasks might have a DC of 10, 15, 20 or even 30.

Whenever you roll a check, if your total roll is **equal to or greater than** the DC, you succeed. If it's **less than** the DC, you fail.

That rule — about figuring out which ability to use, rolling the dice and adding the ability modifier, and comparing it to a DC — is the **core mechanic**. It's the one game rule, the one game mechanic, that makes everything work. If you can tie anything you do to one of the abilities and set a DC, you can figure out whether it succeeds or fails. If you can remember that one rule, you know how to play 90% of a game like *Pathfinder* or *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Getting back to the door…

Breaking the door down is DC 10. It's an old door. The wood's rotten. And the goblins didn't barricade it well. If you rolled a 10 or more — after adding your Strength modifier — you broke the door down in one try. Good for you. If you rolled less than 10, you hit the door with all your might and the door won. You hurt your shoulder. I guess that means we have to talk about how to keep track of your injuries.

Taking a Hit

Heroes take a lot of punishment. They get stabbed, clubbed, and poisoned. They take nasty falls, get blasted with powerful spells, and bust their shoulders up on a lot of doors. It's an ugly world. But heroes also dish out a lot of punishment. They do a lot of stabbing and clubbing and blasting themselves.

Hit points, or **HP**, let us keep track of how much punishment you dish out and how much you take.

Every creature in the world — heroes included — has a certain number of HP. When they get hurt, they lose HP. When they heal up, they regain HP. But they can never regain more HP than they started with.

As a trained fighter, you have 12 HP. That's your starting HP. Your maximum HP. Never change that number. That's how many HP you have when you're completely uninjured and totally healthy. Write that down.

HP: *12*

If you failed your Strength check and hurt your shoulder, you lose 1 HP. Make a note of that. You can write down that you have 11 out of 12 HP or you can use tick marks. Everyone has their own way of keeping track of HP. Just remember to never change your maximum, healthy HP.

If you ever run out of HP, you're in serious trouble. Different games have different rules for what happens then, but usually it involves passing out and slowly bleeding to death unless someone gets some bandages on you or crams a healing potion down your throat. Point is: keep those HP above 0.

Once you've recorded your hit points, you can continue. If you busted the door down, great. Move on.

If you didn't break down the door, try again. If you fail again, you lose another HP. On the third try, though, the door can't take anymore. It bursts open, whatever you roll.

Using Your Skills

> *The door explodes open, sending bits of wood and debris flying everywhere. As the dust clears and your eyes adjust to the dim light inside, you peer through the open doorway into the tower. It's a circular tower. The bottom floor is one big room. The stairs climbing the inside wall collapsed long ago and the upper floors don't seem safe anyway. You're not going upstairs. In the middle of the room, though, is a rectangular hole in the floor. There might have been a cellar door covering it once, but it's long gone too. Now it's just a dark pit. But someone — maybe the goblins, maybe the farmer and son — left a knotted rope dangling into the pit. It's secured by a metal spike driven into the floor. You approach the edge of the pit, light a torch, and drop it into the darkness. It lands on a stone floor about ten feet below. Looks like you're going to have to climb.*

Your abilities determine your basic capabilities. Capabilities like how strong you are and how smart you are. Stuff like that. But they don't represent everything about you. You also have strengths, talents,

education, and specialized training. All the things you learned or trained at are represented by **skills**.

You, for example, have trained your physical abilities all your life. You're a good climber, runner, jumper, and swimmer. You have a skill called **Athletics**.

Skills are usually tied to a particular ability. Athletics is keyed to your Strength. Climbing, jumping, and running take a lot of muscle power. Most of the time, when you make a Strength check, you add your Strength modifier (+3) to the die roll. But, when you make a check that involves climbing or running or other things covered by your Athletics training, you get an extra bonus. A **skill bonus**. In this case, you have Athletics +2.

Usually, we record skills by adding up the total ability modifier and the skill bonus. So, write down:

Athletics: *+5*

That includes the +2 skill bonus and your +3 Strength modifier. All together, this is called a **skill modifier**.

You know what happens next, right? You're going to roll the dice, add them up, and add your skill modifier to the roll. That's called a **skill check**. A skill check works exactly like an ability check, except you get an extra bonus because you trained with a particular skill.

What happens when you have to make a skill check and you've never trained to use that skill? Well, it depends. For some things, like climbing or swimming, you just make a Strength check instead. Anyone can try to keep their head above water or climb over anything. But, if it's something like turning a steel bar into a sword at a blacksmith's forge, you're out of luck. There are some things you just can't do without some training and know-how.

But, back to climbing down the rope into the tower's cellar. It's pretty easy. DC 10. But this circumstance is different. The rope has knots in it that make it easier to climb. Sometimes there are unusual circumstances that make a task easier or harder than normal. That means you add or subtract a bonus or penalty to your check. In this case, you get to add +2 to your roll when you make an Athletics skill check thanks to the knots. That's called a **circumstance bonus**.

Roll the three dice, add the +5 for your Athletics skill, then add +2 more for the circumstance bonus.

If the total is 10 or greater — and it really should be — you succeed and climb down the rope. If you do somehow manage to screw it up, you lose your grip on the rope and fall. You still get to the bottom. In fact, you get there a lot of faster. Unfortunately, the sudden stop at the end is enough to kill your character. Tear up your sheet of paper. You're done. Adventuring is a rough life. And often a short life. Feel free to go back to the beginning of the chapter and start again with a new character, though. Oh, and please e-mail me

and tell me how you managed to actually roll less than a three on three six-sided dice.

Saving Your Bacon

> *Your torch illuminates the ancient cellar. The air is thick and dusty. It's hard to breathe. Cobwebs shroud the walls. The passage of many tiny feet has cleared the middle of the floor of dust. The prints are numerous and overlapping. It's impossible to say how many creatures have come and gone or how often. But the tracks draw your attention to a narrow hallway leading out of the cellar. You pick up your torch, draw your sword, and proceed. It's the only way to go.*
>
> *But no sooner do you step across the threshold into the hallway than your foot snags on something. You stumble. There's a loud noise. You've tripped on a hidden wire and triggered a booby trap!*

Good job, hero. I told you the world was dangerous. You blundered into a trap. Fortunately, you're not dead yet. Or hurt. And you're not completely defenseless. Whenever your character falls victim to a hazard, there's a chance that your character's reflexes, willpower, resilience, or luck might save their bacon. So, you get to make a **saving throw**.

Different games use different saving throw rules. We're going to use the simplest ones. There are three types of saving throws: Fortitude saves, Reflex saves, and Will saves. You use a **Fortitude save** to resist things like poisons and diseases, stuff your body can stave off. **Reflex saves** are for things you can dodge or avoid with quick reflexes. And **Will saves** are for things you can resist with force of will and nerves of steel. Things like mind control magic and the terror induced by your first encounter with a dragon.

Just like skills, saving throws are ability checks with a little extra bonus on top. Reflex saves start with your Dexterity modifier. Fortitude saves start with your Constitution modifier. Will saves start with your Wisdom modifier. Then, you get an extra bonus to reflect your training and experience.

Now, you're a bit clumsy, so your Reflex save starts at -1, your Dexterity modifier. But, you've trained in combat and honed your reactions. So, you get an extra +2 bonus to Reflex saves. The total, then, is +1. You can write that down:

Reflex Save: *+1*

Back to the game.

You're caught on a trip wire and trigger a hidden mechanism that launches an arrow right at you. You need to dodge out of the way. Roll the dice and add your Reflex save.

Did you get a 15 or better? Yeah. The DC is 15. Surprise arrows flying at your face from out of the darkness are hard to dodge in the split-second you have. If you got a 15, good for you, you dodged aside just in time. If not, your quick reflexes got you out of the way, but not completely out of the way. The arrow grazes your shoulder and you lose 2 HP. Ouch.

Once you staunch the bleeding, keep exploring.

Hitting Stuff and Getting Hit Back

> *Gravel crunches under your boots as you explore the hallway. You take slow steps, wary of traps, and keep your sword at the ready. The floors and walls are uneven, bricks and tiles are missing everywhere. After several long minutes, the hallway opens into a broad, underground room. Mold and mildew cover the walls. Water pools in the spaces between the broken tiles. But you don't have time to admire the scenery. There's a goblin at the far end of the room. And it doesn't look happy to see you.*
>
> *It's short, about half your height, and squat. It wears thick, leather scraps over cloth rags. Beady little eyes glow yellow in the torchlight and its crimson skin gives it a devilish look. Pointed ears. Pointed nose. Pointed teeth. The thing brandishes a hatchet, a simple lumberjack's axe but deadly nonetheless. In its other hand, a makeshift shield made of old wooden planks.*
>
> *It hisses something in its foul language. You don't understand the words, but you can tell it's challenging you. Especially because the thing rushes toward you, waving the hatchet above its head. It's about twenty feet away and closing. You ready your sword and prepare to meet its attack.*

I'll bet you've been waiting for this, right? A fight? Well, it's on. You might be a little beat up from your adventure so far, or you might be at peak health. That's how it goes. How you handle yourself in one encounter can have consequences in later encounters.

By the way, when you're dealing with an obstacle or enemy, it's called an **encounter**. And when you're dealing with an enemy violently, that's called a **combat encounter**.

During a combat encounter, all the normal rules of the game are still in effect. You still make choices and we still use ability checks to figure out what happens. When you get hurt, you lose HP. When you run out of HP, you're critically injured and about to die. But, in

combat encounters, things happen fast and seconds count. So, we have to add some extra rules.

During a combat, we break the action down into rounds. A **round** is only enough time for everyone in the combat to take one **turn**. Even though it may take several minutes to play through an entire combat round, in the game only a few seconds pass. So, you only have enough time on your turn to take one action. You can attack a foe, fire an arrow from your bow, cast a magic spell, drink a magic potion, or drop into a defensive stance. Or you can do anything else that comes to mind. Anything you could do in under ten seconds, anyway.

All the creatures in a fight — including the heroes — take turns in order. A special Dexterity check called an **initiative roll** determines that order. At the start of a combat, every creature makes a Dexterity check. They roll the dice and add their Dexterity modifier. The highest roller takes the first turn and then everyone else goes in order of their rolls. Then, the round ends and a new round starts. Every round uses the same initiative rolls. You don't have to reroll. Everyone goes again, taking another turn, and that continues until the combat is over.

Go ahead and roll for your initiative right now. Make a Dexterity check.

How'd you do? The goblin got a 13. They are fast little things. If you beat the goblin, you get to take the first action. If you didn't, it goes first. If you tied, the goblin goes first. Sorry, it's Dexterity is higher than yours.

That settles who goes first. Now, let's talk about **attack rolls.** When you attack something with a weapon, like your sword, you make an attack roll to see if you land a good, solid blow and hurt your target. Attack rolls are just ability checks. When you're using a sword, you make a Strength check. Since you have the benefit of years of training with your sword, you add a bonus to your Strength modifier. The total is +5.

When you attack something with your sword, you roll the dice and add +5. If you roll high enough, you land a solid blow that injures your target. Otherwise, your target is unhurt. You might miss, it might dodge or deflect the attack, or you might not land a good enough blow to penetrate its armor. It doesn't matter what happened. All that matters is that you didn't actually hurt your target.

If you land a hit, we need to know how bad you've hurt your target. And that's determined by a **damage roll**. Every weapon — everything that can hurt someone — has a damage roll. The damage roll tells us how many HP the victim loses. Your sword has a damage of 1d6 + 3.

What does that mean? Well, in role-playing games, we use several different types of dice. The dice you've been using — the normal board game dice — have six sides. They are numbered from one to six. We call that a d6. There are dice with different numbers of sides, too. Four-sided dice, dice with eight or ten or twelve sides, and even dice with twenty sides. And we abbreviate them as d4, d8, d10, d12, and d20.

You've been rolling d6s so far. Specifically, you've been rolling 3d6. That's how we say, "roll three, six-sided dice and add them all together." You could roll 2d4 or 4d8. And we can add a positive or negative number after the abbreviation to tell you to add a number. When you roll your Strength check, you're rolling 3d6 + 3.

By the way, if we were playing *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Pathfinder* for real, you'd roll 1d20 for all your ability checks. Not 3d6. 3d6 is a good approximation if you don't have any d20s. I figured it was easier to do that than to tell you to put the book down, go to the store, and get a bunch of crazy dice.

The point is, when you actually land a good hit with your sword, you roll one six-sided die and add +3. That tells you how many HP your victim loses.

Write this down, by the way:

Sword: *Attack +5, Damage 1d6 + 3*

The final piece of the combat puzzle is how hard it is to actually hit your target. And hit them well enough to hurt them. In other words, what is the Difficulty Class, the DC, to hit your target. Well, that's determined by your ability to dodge and your training and the armor you're wearing. And we sum all that together into one statistic called **Armor Class** or **AC**. That's your primary defensive statistic.

Your AC is 15. You're wearing steel armor which provides good defense, but it also hinders you because it makes you a little slow and thus easier to hit in general. Your AC would be greater if you were carrying your shield, but your other hand is holding a torch, so you can actually see. So, no shield bonus. Write down your AC, too.

Armor Class: *15*

The whole process goes like this. Roll an attack roll. That means you roll your dice — 3d6 — and add the attack roll for the weapon you're using. If the total result is greater than or equal to your target's Armor Class, you landed a solid hit. Roll the damage roll for the weapon you're using. The target loses that many hit points.

With all that information, you can play out this battle. Normally, I'd play for the goblin, but I'm not there. So, you have to play both sides.

The goblin has the following statistics.

Goblin
HP: *4*
AC: *12*
Hatchet: *Attack +4, Damage 2*

Go ahead. Who goes first? You or the goblin? Whoever goes first rushes forward and makes an attack. Roll an attack roll. Compare it to the target's Armor Class. If it hits, apply the damage. If you hit, that means you roll your damage roll for your sword. The goblin's hatchet always does 2 damage.

Play back and forth, making attack rolls and keeping track of the hit points. Keep going until one of you is dead. Yeah, I know it's just trading blows back and forth. Most combats will be more interesting than that. People will be moving around and using special abilities. You will have allies to help you and you may be fighting several enemies at once. But this is just to help you get the basics down.

Go ahead, fight it out.

Adventure Awaits

How did it go? Did you survive? Are you ready to keep exploring? I'll bet you are. But you're going to have to continue this story on your own.

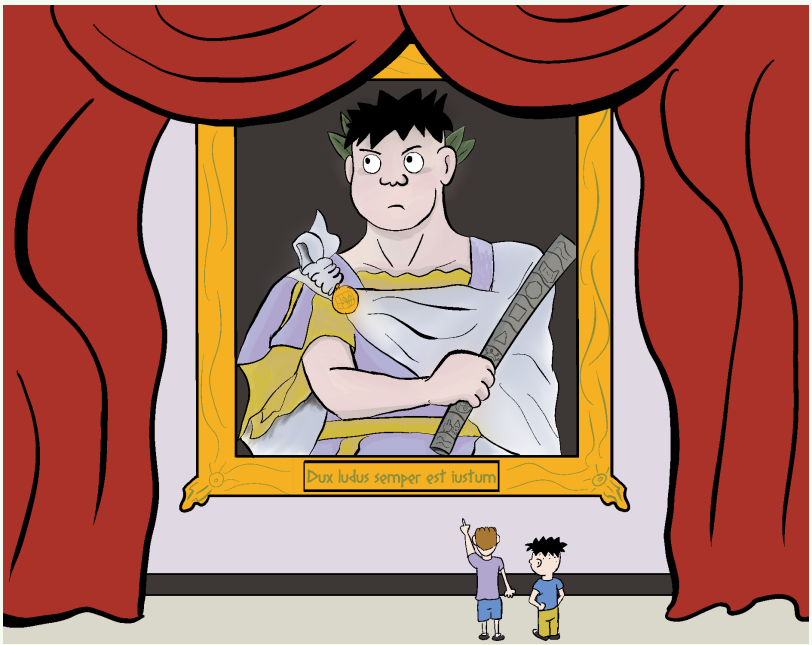
I just wanted to teach you the basics of a role-playing game. How you'll find yourself in all sorts of different situations. How you'll make choices based on the character you're playing. How you use different rules to figure out what happens. And, as you move from situation to situation and make different choices, a game and a story emerge.

But there is something even more important than the rules. Something that makes every role-playing game work. Something that makes them unique. Well, not some*thing*. Some*one*. Someone to fill a very special, vital, and important role. You can't have a game of *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Pathfinder* without a Game Master.

What do you do if you want to play these amazing games and can't find someone who is willing to be your Game Master? Well, you're going to have to fill the role yourself. But what is a Game Master? What do they do? How do they make the game happen? I'll explain that in the next chapter.

Chapter 2:

The Game Master: The Best Game Mechanic Ever



Role-playing games are games and that means they are made of rules. But games aren't just made of rules. Games have boards and pieces. They have dice and spinners and cards. And they have goals and stories and terminology. There's a lot to a game. Even a simple game. Game designers call all that stuff — all the stuff they design — game mechanics. That's just a term for all the bits and pieces that add up to a game.

Role-playing games have one special, unique mechanic that most other games don't. And it's a pretty brilliant mechanic. It allows the players to do almost anything they can imagine and not bring the game to a dead stop or break anything. And I know this sounds crazy, but that game mechanic is actually a person.

The Mechanic That's a Person

In the last chapter, I emphasized that role-playing games let you make a choice and see what happens. But maybe that didn't come

across too well. Because this is a book, and I'm not psychic. So, I couldn't actually take your choices into account. If we were playing face to face, I would have. And that's what makes role-playing games great. They are totally open. Totally free. You might encounter anything. And you can try anything. Anything that makes sense anyway.

How? Part of it is the simple core mechanic that lets you figure out how things work out just by rolling some dice. Mostly, though, it's because the entire game gets redesigned by a human brain as you play. That brain creates new situations, reacts to unexpected developments, and uses a set of simple rules to decide what happens in any situation.

And, if you're reading this book, then that human brain is probably you.

As a Game Master — a GM — you don't just play the game, you make the game happen. You are the game. You're an Xbox or a PlayStation or a Nintendo WiiDS Switch. Whatever. You create the world, fill it with challenges, and shove it in the players' faces. In return, they try to guide their own Marios and Master Chefs and Lara Drakes through the challenges. Rescue the princess. Retrieve the TriForces. Kill Cortana. Stop the tyrannosaurus from conquering the Lost City of El Dorado. Whatever you decide the challenge is.

How do you create the game? How do you shove it in their faces? Well, there's lots of ways. Maps can show the dungeons of Hyrule. Figurines can represent characters fighting the dark elves. Virtual table-top software like *Fantasy Grounds* shares maps and pictures online while you chat with your players via talk or text. But you might not have to have any of that. Because most of what you do, you do with words.

Remember all that italicized text in the last chapter?

> *After several long minutes, the hallway opens into a broad, underground room. Mold and mildew cover the walls. Water pools in the spaces between the broken tiles. But you don't have time to admire the scenery. There's a goblin at the far end of the room. And it doesn't look happy to see you.*

All that flowery, descriptive garbage? That's the GM talking. Or typing in a chat window. Whatever. That's you — the GM — creating the world.

Then, when a player says, "I want to break down the door." Or "we should look for another way in." Or something like "forget this crap, Zantar Thromin wants to head back to the tavern to get drunk and play dice all night," you figure out what happens. And you describe that to the players too.

That sounds like a lot of work, doesn't it? And for what? For something the players could get out of any video game? With better graphics? What's the point?

Well, let me tell you the point Mr. or Mrs. Naysayer!

A Human Brain is Better than a Computer

Video games are great. I love them. And yes, I've played games other than *Pong*. I'm not that old, kid. Well, I have played *Pong*. And *Pitfall*. But I've also played every *Legend of Zelda* game. All of them. The original, impossible ones and *Breath of the Wild* and all the ones in between. I beat the original *Battletoads*. Well, almost. But I can still beat the speeder bike part. And I've beaten every *Dark Souls* game. I've explored Tamriel and Terra and Gaia and Runeterra and TerraGaia and Pulse and Cocoon and Eos. And whatever games you're playing right now — that come out after I finish writing this book — I'll play those, too. I love video games.

But there's always stuff you can't do in video games. Because you can only do what the programmers decided you can do. Metroid can't crawl. Zelda can't jump unless he jumps off something. Andromeda can only fly to planets that the programmers designed. Bloodborne can't open that door at the end of the bridge past Cleric Beast. And Ellen Page can only choose one of three different lines of dialogue in conversation. Every game has limits.

And even if that never bothers you, even if you never scream, "why can't Metroid crawl?" Or "why can't I refuse this freaking quest? I hate this NPC.", there's still the problem that the game can't respond to what you want. It can't change the game because you want to go in a different direction. It can't add new stuff because you got to the end and you're not ready to quit playing. Not counting shallow, randomly generated dungeons and stuff.

Imagine some townsperson asks you to go get twenty wolf pelts for them. And they tell you they are trying to open a store to sell wolf-fur coats. And you find yourself thinking that it'd be cool to run a wolf-fur coat store. You could sell all sorts of coats. And boots. Gray wolf. Dire wolf. Artic wolf. Lava wolf. Werewolf. Because video games always have way more types of wolves than they need. Well, you can't do that. Because the game isn't about selling wolf-fur coats and running a shop. It's about fighting the evil empire or some stupid thing like that. And no matter what, the game can't change itself just because you want to do something different.

Board games have the same problem. *Settlers of Catan* is a fun game, sure. But think about that time your jerk friend wouldn't trade you any bricks. You couldn't build cities because she had all the bricks and you couldn't get any. Wouldn't it be easier if you could go

to war? Take her bricks by force? But you can't. Because the rules are what they are. They can't change.

But imagine if every video game came with its own Shigeru Miyamoto. And if every board game came with a clone of Klaus Teuber. Klaus Teuber? He's the guy who designed *Settlers of Catan*. Don't feel bad if you didn't know that. I had to look it up. Anyway…

Imagine if you got a game designer with every game. Whenever Link comes to a gap he can't jump over, you grab Miyamoto and say, "Link jumps over the gap; program a jump button." And you're over the gap. In the middle of a game of *Catan*, you whip out a Teuber clone and say, "I'm going to war for those bricks; invent some rules for that." Suddenly, your friend's half of the island is a smoking ruin and you're stacking bricks and building cities.

That's why role-playing games have a Game Master. The GM is a game designer who can redesign the game as it is played. That's something no computer, no video game, could ever do. Not yet anyway. And, if we believe all those Matrix and Terminator movies, if we ever do make a computer that can do that, it's going to kill us all and destroy the world.

And that's why human brains are better than computers.

Your Mission, If You Choose to Accept It

As a GM — because, again, you'll probably end up a GM if you're reading this — as a GM, you have a lot of jobs. Your main jobs are: tell the players what's going on in the world, ask them what they do about it, and figure out what happens. But that's not all. Like video game worlds, RPG worlds are filled with all sorts of people and creatures. The players are the heroes of the story. Your job is to be everyone else. From shopkeepers, monsters, villains, kings, queens, and quest-givers, to hench-people, helper fairies, talking hats, and artificially intelligent wrist-computer holograms.

You also have the job of creating new content whenever one of the players climbs up a hill at the edge of the game world. That place where video games slap you down with invisible walls and messages about "leaving the mission area"? You have to figure out what's over that hill.

You're a narrator, storyteller, referee, actor, and game designer all rolled into one. You *are* the game.

And, let me tell you something: It's pretty great. It's fun and creative and satisfying. That's why I've been doing it for three decades. And that's why I'm writing books about it.

Neither Friend nor Foe

Now, the relationship between the GM and the players can be kind of confusing for first timers. I mean, there's really only two types of

games out there in general, right? You've got your cooperative games and you've got your competitive games. Either everyone is on your team or its you versus them.

Being a GM isn't like either of those things. Except it's like both of them. Sometimes. And sometimes, it's completely its own thing.

Consider this: You're playing all the characters in the world except for the heroes, right? That means you're playing all the heroes' friends and allies. And all the shopkeepers and quest givers and everything. Those people are mostly on the heroes' team. But you're also all the villains and monsters and orcs and dragons. And those things are mostly trying to kill the heroes.

You're not on any team. You're beyond teams. That's because you're not really playing the same game as the players. You're a referee. You want a fair game. Whoever wins — heroes or villains — it should be the team that earned the win. You're also a game designer. You want people to like your game. You want them to have fun. And that also means you want a fair game. A game people can't win is frustrating. And a game they can't lose is boring. You want the players to win if they earn the win. And you want them to feel like they could lose. And if they don't earn the win, they should lose. Games don't stop being fun because you lose one time.

Again, you're like Shigeru Miyamoto or Klaus Teuber or whoever your favorite game designer is. Miyamoto designed those freaking lynels with their stupid amounts of HP and charging attacks and fireballs, but he didn't do it because he wanted players to lose. He doesn't have a mug that magically fills itself with gamer tears. He just wanted to challenge players so when they do beat a lynel, they've earned the horns and guts and gems it drops.

Of course, that means, when you are playing a monster, the players have to believe the monster is trying to kill them. That's part of the fun. You want your monsters and villains to be a threat. Otherwise the players will get cocky. They'll feel invincible. When they realize they're not in danger anymore, they'll realize no choice they make matters. Then, they'll get bored. But the players can never think that you, personally, are gunning for them. That you're trying to make them lose. Otherwise, they'll feel hopeless. They'll realize no choice they make matters. Then, they'll get frustrated.

How do you do that? Well, the trick is to know when to change your hat.

Many Hats for your Avatar

Like someone with an Xbox Live account and a stolen credit card, as GM, you have a lot of hats. And you have to be constantly changing your hat. You have a Game Designer hat, a Referee hat, a Storyteller hat, a World Creator hat, a Friend hat, an Enemy hat, a Pretends-to-

Be-a-Friend-but-Is-Going-to-Betray-You hat — we call that one the Sean Beanie — and so on. Metaphorically. And you always have to wear the right hat in the right situation. Even if that means changing hats from one moment to the next.

For example, imagine you're running a battle between the heroes and a firestorm dragon. The battle is fierce. The players are pretty much doomed. The dragon swoops down. It opens its mouth. It's about to unleash a blast of flaming lightning to finish off the party. And you, wearing your Dragon hat, are ready to roll the dice and finish off your friends. Suddenly, Yosefka the Warlock remembers she has a magical *potion of bovine metamorphosis* that turns anyone who drinks it into a cow for three hours. Yosefka wants to hurl the potion down the dragon's gullet. Does it work?

Now you take off the Dragon hat. After all, the Dragon would say, "No. Of course it doesn't work. Now die foolish heroes!" But the dragon doesn't get to decide how the rules of the game work. You need to put on your Referee hat and figure out what happens. And then, whatever happens, you've got to put the Dragon hat back on and go right back to trying to kill the heroes. Possibly using some sort of milk-based attack.

Eventually, all the hat-switching will become second nature. It will even become fun. But at first it feels overwhelming juggling all those roles and changing sides over and over. Fortunately, you're not completely unarmed when you're running a game.

It's Dangerous to Go Alone

When you're running a game, you've got a lot of tools at your disposal. It isn't only you, your brain, and a collection of imaginary hats. You also have a set of rules to help you figure out what happens in a fair and consistent way. They can't cover everything you can possibly imagine. If they could, the game wouldn't need you. But they do cover a lot. And they are open-ended. They can seem complicated and over-detailed sometimes, but they're built in layers. The more detailed rules sit over the simpler rules. And they all sit on top of the one core mechanic. With time and practice, you'll learn to see the rules as tools to help you run the game. Not as a set of absolute laws to memorize and follow to the letter.

You also learn that close enough is usually good enough. The rules aren't perfect. And you don't have to use them perfectly. But you should make an effort to understand them.

Beyond the rules of the game, there's a whole bunch of other stuff out there to help you create and run games. There're whole books devoted just to teaching you how to run good games. Like the one you're holding right now. Some of them are great. Like the one you're holding right now. A lot are garbage. Even the official ones.

And there's lots of other stuff out there, too. Books and websites and podcasts and YouTube channels. There's so much stuff!

And that's the problem. If you don't know what you're doing, it's almost impossible to know what you need. Or even to know what's out there. And gamers? Well, they try to be helpful. But they forget how overwhelming it can be to walk into a game or comic store and see a wall covered in textbooks. And they all say things like *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder* and *Star Wars* and *Core Rulebook* and *Players Guide* and *Xandelkeinin's Guide to the Monsters of the Realms* and *Ultimate Combat Adventure Tactics Sourcebook* and *Lost Mine of the Haunted Watermountain: Dark Lords of the Abyssal Underworld, 2nd Edition Revised*.

Imagine, for a moment, how your grandmother feels on your birthday. You asked for *Rise of the Tomb Raider: Game of the Year Edition* for the Xbox One. So, she walks into GameStop, surrounded by all that crap she has no clue about. The employees are no help. It's GameStop. She has no clue. So, you end up with a copy of *Tomb Raider Anniversary* for the PSP. And a subscription to GameStop's garbage magazine they push on everyone who walks in the door.

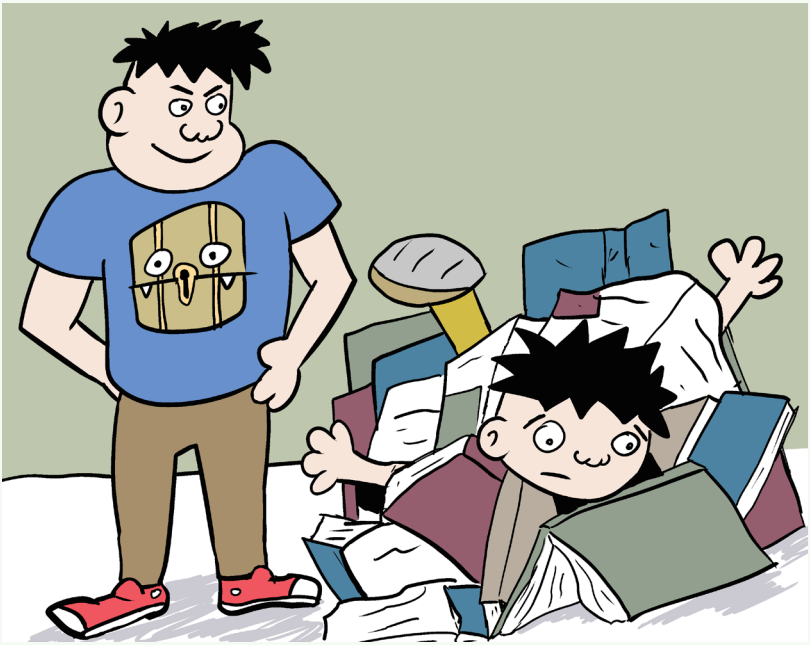
That's what it's like trying to figure out how to get started with fantasy RPGs. And that's why you should cut your grandmother a little slack.

But it doesn't have to be complicated. RPGs aren't that complicated. Just like you learn the difference between a game console, a game, and a peripheral, and you know a game gets released for a specific console, you can't use a game in the wrong console, and everything GameStop pushes on you is utter trash, role-playing gamers eventually understand the difference between systems and editions and modules and adventure paths. They know what's necessary, what's helpful, and what's garbage.

Well, I'm here to explain it to you. In the next chapter, I'm that one reasonable guy who points to the shelf and says, "you need a console, a game, a controller, and an HDMI cable. Then you can start playing. Ignore the rest of that junk for now."

Chapter 3:

Games and Systems and Editions and Dice and Stuff



There is nothing scarier than to walk into an unknown place filled with strange relics where everyone speaks a language you don't understand. I'm not talking about some in-game adventure here. I'm talking about going to a local book, comic, or game store to figure out what the heck you need to start playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Pathfinder*, or some other role-playing game. And don't even get me started on trying to hunt down something on Amazon if you don't know exactly what you're looking for.

The whole experience can be overwhelming, confusing, and expensive. But it doesn't have to be. Because, even though there's a ton of stuff out there, you don't need most of it. All you need is a rules system, an adventure module, and some dice. Simple.

Well, maybe it's not that simple. Nothing on the gaming shelves says, "rules system." Lots of things are labeled "adventure module." But most of them are only compatible with certain systems. And, as for dice, well, until you tried to become a gamer, you probably didn't realize dice could be so complicated. So, let me explain how role-

playing game products work. And where they came from. I'll make it quick. I promise.

The Entire History of Role-Playing Games in Three Paragraphs

Once upon a time in 1974, there were these two nerds named Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson. They lived in the middle of nowhere. These two nerds spent all their time playing wargames. Like chess, but more complicated. Two sides, two armies, one winner, one loser. One day, they decided chess would be a lot more fun if the pieces all had names and personalities, and could do things other than fighting each other all the time. Like running actual kingdoms. And fighting dragons. Mostly fighting dragons. So, they invented a new game called *Dungeons & Dragons* and that was basically that. A lot of people liked it.

Dungeons & Dragons isn't really one game though. It is a set of rules that allows play of lots of other games. It's a game engine. A game system. A group of people play individual games about specific characters going on various quests in different fantasy worlds. Those are called **campaigns**. Each campaign is created and run by one Game Master for several players. Their individual quests are called **adventures** or **scenarios**. One campaign can last for months or even years and involves a lot of individual adventures.

D&D got popular. Gygax's company, TSR, started selling pre-written adventures so everyone didn't have to write their own. Those are called **modules**. And they also started to publish books with new rules and new options. Those are called **supplements**. Meanwhile, other companies wanted to get in on the RPG thing. Another company invented a different RPG called *Tunnels and Trolls*. And it had its own modules and supplements. Other games appeared too. From other companies. At the same time, *Dungeons & Dragons* got really big and all the extra rules made it really complicated and a lot of it was old and out of date. So, they revised *Dungeons & Dragons* and published a new, fresh version. A new **edition**. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*. Years later, they did that again with *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, 2nd Edition.* Then TSR was bought by another company, Wizards of the Coast. And they revised *Dungeons & Dragons* again. Now it was *3rd Edition*. And they patched that to fix some problems. That was *D&D 3.5*. Then they made *4th Edition*. Meanwhile, this other company, Paizo, had been publishing stuff for *Dungeons & Dragons*, but Wizards of the Coast said they couldn't do that anymore. And Paizo didn't like *4th Edition*, so they made their own game called *Pathfinder*, which was based heavily on the old *D&D 3.5* game. Currently, *Dungeons & Dragons* is on its fifth revision, *Dungeons & Dragons 5E*, and Paizo is making plans to

release *Pathfinder 2*. Meanwhile, lots of other companies also made lots of other games. And every edition of every game has its own supplements and modules. And none of them are compatible with each other. Or even with older editions of the same game.

And that's how the RPG section at the store got so complicated in fifty years.

The Console Game

So, you have a bunch of different role-playing games out there. But those games aren't really games. They are sets of rules you can use to create and run games. Those are the rules you've heard of like *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Pathfinder*, *The Star Wars Role-Playing Game*, and so on. Some of them are very similar to each other. Some are even based on older, more generic systems. For example, both *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder* are based on a generic set of rules called the *d20 System*. Other games, like *Star Wars* and *Shadowrun*, use their own, unique rules and do their own things.

You can think of those games like video game consoles. Each one — *D&D*, *Pathfinder*, etc. — let you play all sorts of individual adventures. And they've all gone through different versions. Different editions. *D&D* and *Pathfinder* are like the Nintendo Switch and the PlayStation. Different hardware made by different companies to run different games. The difference between *D&D 4E* and *D&D 5E* is more like the difference between the Nintendo Wii and the Nintendo Switch. Different versions of the same hardware. That still run different games. But they are made by the same company.

The Core of the Game

Every role-playing game has a set of **core rules**. Those are the basic rules of the game. They are the bare minimum. To play the game, you need a copy of the core rules. You can find the core rules for *Dungeons & Dragons* in a book called *The Player's Handbook*. The core rules for *Pathfinder* are, quite helpfully, in a book called the *Core Rulebook*. If you want to learn to play either of those games, that's where you start.

Now, you can pick either of those two games. They're pretty similar. Really similar. But there are some key differences. *Dungeons & Dragons* is a little simpler, but it's not as deep and it doesn't offer as many options. *Pathfinder* has lots of interesting options and lots of ways to play, but even the basic game is a little more complicated. Not much, though. Both are based on an older set of generic game rules called the *d20 System*. And that's the system I used back in **Chapter 1,** so you'd have a good foundation for either game. Because I'm just that wonderful.

The *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook* or the *Pathfinder Core Rulebook* are all you need to get started playing those games. All you need to do then is find a Game Master to run games for you, or find and join an existing group of players. But, if you're going to run your own games as a Game Master — either because you want to or because you can't find an existing group to join — you need a little bit more.

There are two additional books for *Dungeons & Dragons* to help you start running your own games. One of them contains all the rules and statistics for all the monsters and enemies in the basic game. That's called the *Monster Manual*. The other is a guide to creating and running games called the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. By the way, in *D&D* — and ONLY in *D&D* — the Game Master is called a Dungeon Master. That's because *D&D* likes to feel special.

By contrast, *Pathfinder* puts pretty much everything you need to run games in the *Core Rulebook*. The only other thing you need is the book of monster and enemy statistics. Theirs is called the *Bestiary*.

Together, all those books are called the **core rulebooks**. If you have those books on your shelf, for either system, you can play and run role-playing games for years and years and years. As long as you're willing to create your own games.

Don't Make What You Can Buy

If you're just starting out, you're probably not ready to create your own games. You can if you want to, but I don't recommend it. Not until you have a little experience running games. Instead, you'll want to take advantage of the fact that both Wizards of the Coast and Paizo — and pretty much every other game company out there — publish actual game modules for their systems.

Wizards of the Coast focuses on publishing long, multi-part adventures for *Dungeons & Dragons* in big, expensive, glossy, hardcover books. Recent modules include the gothic vampire horror romance adventure *Curse of Strahd* and the jungle adventure dinosaur treasure hunt *Tomb of Annihilation*. There's a bunch of others too. Just look for the phrase "adventure for the world's greatest roleplaying game" on the cover. That'll tell you the book contains an adventure module you can run for your friends. And also how full of themselves the designers at Wizards of the Coast are. And that they disagree with me on whether role-playing has a hyphen.

Anyway…

Paizo publishes a lot of adventures for *Pathfinder*. Like, A LOT. They are really good at publishing adventures in the same way that a fire hose is really good at providing water. They publish short adventures that fill a couple of game sessions called *Pathfinder Modules*. One of the best is a starter adventure called *Crypt of the*

Everflame. They also publish longer, multi-part adventures which they call *Pathfinder Adventure Paths*. Each one is a series of six numbered modules with a title like *War for the Crown* or *Mummy's Mask*. Sometimes, they even compile all six parts into one nice, hardcover book. They did that with the *Rise of the Runelords* adventure module. It was pretty great.

Because Paizo is so much better at putting out content than Wizards of the Coast, it is easier to find published stuff to run for *Pathfinder*. *Dungeons & Dragons* has fewer published adventures and offers less variety, but it's also a lot easier to create your own games for *Dungeons & Dragons*. The choice between the two systems isn't that big a deal. The games are very similar, and they offer the same types of fantasy action adventure. Whichever game you choose, you'll probably be happy.

Getting it All in One Box

Given that you're now buying two or three big, hardcover books and one or more adventure modules, it might seem like this is getting expensive. It is. No lie. Getting started with *Dungeons & Dragons* this way can cost 200 bucks American. *Pathfinder* can be slightly cheaper. About 150 smackers if you stick with a smaller adventure. And the books themselves are big and thick and heavy. That's why a lot of people get turned off to role-playing games. It's expensive and overwhelming.

But there is an easier way to get started. What if I told you that you could have a simplified set of rules to start you off and a complete adventure module. All in one box. And you'd also get some maps, dice, tokens, characters, and other random bits and pieces to sweeten the deal. Sounds pretty good, right? Well, Wizards of the Coast publishes just such a set. It's called the *Dungeons & Dragons Starter Set*. And Paizo also sells a similar set: The *Pathfinder Beginner Box*. They are a much easier, much cheaper way to get started.

But…

They won't last you forever. They'll give you a few good game sessions with your friends, but you're not getting the complete core rules and the adventures they include are pretty limited. After about three or four weeks of play, you'll have to buy all that other stuff I mentioned to keep playing. That's why I explained that first.

The thing is, as expensive as it is to get started, the same set of rules can give you ten years of fun. No lie. I played with the same three core rulebooks for *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, 2nd Edition* for eight years. And between *Dungeons and Dragons, 3rd Edition* and *Pathfinder*, I got fourteen years of regular games with my friends. So, the expense is worth it. It's pretty good value.

It's a good thing too. Because this hobby can be a drain on your wallet if you're not careful.

Starting Your Dice Addiction

Apart from the rules, the other thing that you definitely need is a set of special dice. RPGs don't only use nice, normal, six-sided dice. No. We gamers need to feel different. Unique. Special. That's why we have all this complicated terminology too. It makes us feel like we're not just sitting around playing "let's pretend we're a bunch of elves killing orcs."

Most RPGs use a standard set of seven polyhedral dice. That's a useless Greek word for "many sided." As if we'd have dice with just ONE side. As I mentioned briefly in Chapter 1, each die has a certain number of sides: four, six, eight, ten, twelve, and twenty. We call them the d4, d6, d8, d10, d12, and d20. The seventh die is an extra d10 numbered 10, 20, 30..., etc. That way, you can roll both d10s together and get a number between 1 and 100.

You can get these dice in pretty much any comic or game store these days. And you can find them on Amazon or buy them from any number of online retailers. Just search for "polyhedral dice" or "RPG dice." They come in standard sets. Buy a set. Buy two. Buy ten.

That might sound crazy. But, trust me, you'll buy ten one day. Every gamer eventually gets addicted to buying dice. I'm warning you. It's going to happen. If you think the stupid books are expensive, wait until you've played for a few years and add up what you've spent on dice. Fortunately, once people know you're a gamer, they start giving you dice for every holiday, birthday, and special event. It'll just never be enough.

For now, though, you can just buy one set. Pick nice ones. And treat them well.

Miniatures, Maps, and Tokens

A role-playing game is mostly about talking. And rolling dice. And buying dice. But visual aids can be very helpful sometimes. And they look cool. Maps are a big part of role-playing games. Partly because you do a lot of exploring in most RPGs and partly because it helps play out combat. When a fight breaks out, it is helpful to know exactly where everyone is and who can see who and who can hit who. That way, you know exactly who's hit with friendly fire when Dane Spellbinder launches another careless fireball without checking the area of effect first. There's a Dane Spellbinder at every game table. Trust me.

Fortunately, there's all sorts of stuff you can buy to help you map the world and play out the fights. Some adventures come with preprinted poster maps you can spread out on the table. Some are

sold separately because game designers can be greedy jerks. There are also generic maps available for sale. And tiles you can use to build your own maps. And vinyl and dry erase mats you can draw your own maps onto.

There are hundreds of miniature figures specifically for use with fantasy role-playing games. And other role-playing games. And table-top wargames. You can buy them pre-painted or you can paint your own. Because nothing is more fun than trying to hold your hand steady enough to paint eyebrows on a hobbit figure that's less than a freaking inch tall!

If miniature figures aren't your thing, there's all sorts of standees and tokens you can use instead. And it's pretty easy to make your own tokens.

And those starter sets I mentioned? Those usually come with a pile of junk in there. Maps and tokens and status trackers and all sorts of cardboard and plastic garbage to lose.

Do you need any of this junk? No. Absolutely not. Some of it helps. Some of it is just fun. Some of it is a waste. But, need it or not, you're going to buy some of it eventually. Wasting money on a bunch of secondary hobbies and stupid obsessions is just part of being a gamer.

Man, this is such a great hobby.

Now What?

Look, I could go on forever about all the stupid, useless gamer tools you'll eventually end up buying. And I could talk about the endless piles of rulebooks and supplements out there for every game. And I could keep telling you how great role-playing games are in general. But I'd be wasting your time. At this point, either you're sold on the idea of trying a role-playing game for yourself, or you're already done with this stupid, confusing, expensive hobby. And my stupid book. And if you are, go ahead and close the book and throw it out and leave your one-star review on Amazon criticizing my stupid jokes and my overuse of long, compound sentences, and suggesting that I should do the world a favor by dying in a fire. I've been on the Internet a long time. I've heard it all.

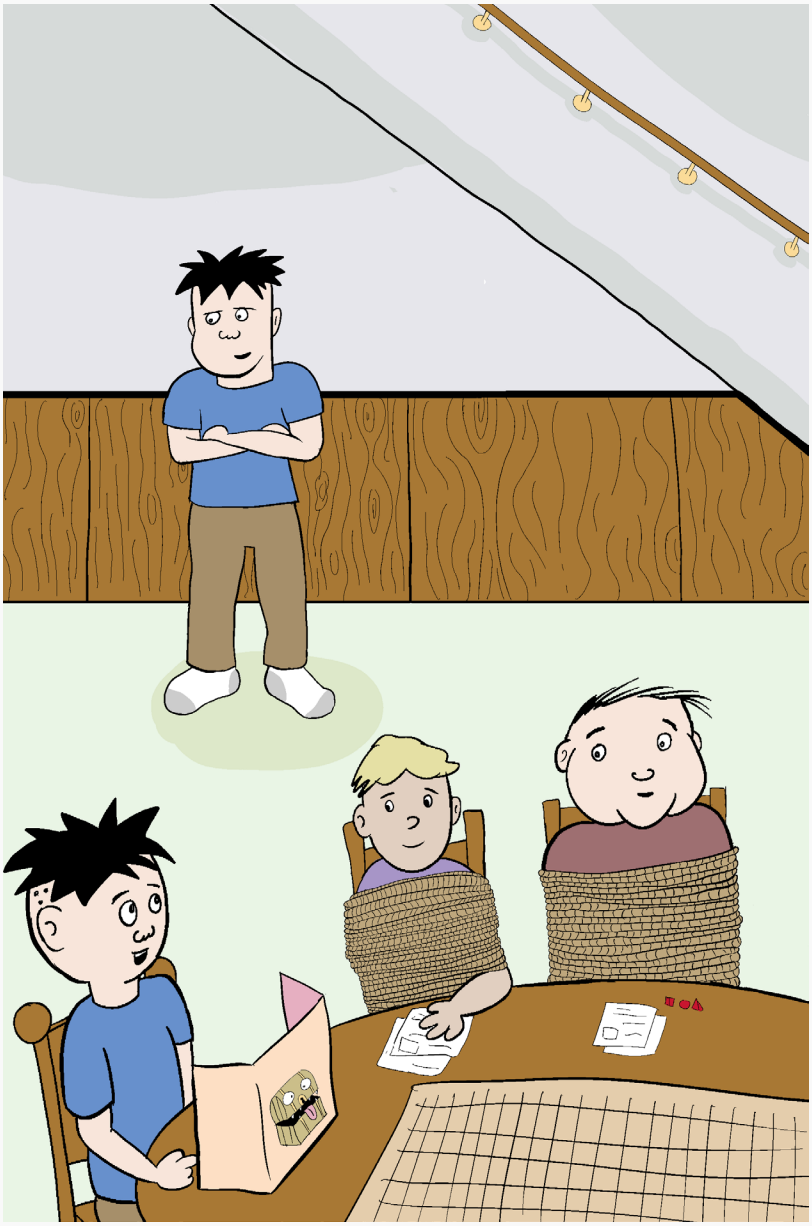
But if you've stuck it out this long, you're probably ready to give *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Pathfinder* a try. And that means you've got two paths in front of you. Either try to find someone who already plays RPGs and see if they'll let you into their game. The local game or comic book store is a good place to look for a game you can join. Or, if joining someone else's game isn't for you, you can just kidnap three of your friends, grab the stuff you need, learn the rules, and run your own game. Which, fortunately, is what the second part of this book is all about.

Or you can just close the book, throw it out, and leave that review.

The choice is yours. What do you do?

Part II:

Getting Your (First) Game On



Chapter 4:

Get Ready... Get Set...

Welcome, new Game Master! This chapter — and the next three — are for you. I assume you're here because you've decided to take a stab at this "running role-playing games" thing yourself. You either read the first part of this book, **The World of Role-Playing Games**, or skipped it because you already know what role-playing games are and have some experience with them. Doesn't matter. As long as you know what role-playing games are, I'm going to tell you the right way to run your first role-playing game session. Well, first, I'm going to tell you how to get ready for your first game session. Actually, first I'm going to destroy your confidence. That's just how I roll.

The Non-Pep Talk

Listen: your first session is going to suck. You're going to be confused, nervous, and overwhelmed. You're going to stammer and stutter. You're going to feel like your players are judging you the whole time. They will be. And you're probably going to panic. You're going to walk away thinking you did a terrible job.

And you did.

Because that's what happens when you do something for the first time. You aren't good at it. No one is good at things they've never done before. Expecting anything else is stupid. And you're going to be doing this thing you've never done in front of an audience. That makes it worse.

The truth is that the only way to get good at doing something is to do it badly first. No amount of reading about the theory will help. I mean, you *might* be a prodigy. You might be a natural. But you won't be. Those people are rare. So, you're going to be bad at it. And you'll feel bad. And if you stop there, you'll never be good at it. If everyone stopped there, there'd be no Game Masters and no games, and I'd have to get a real job instead of running websites and writing books. And no one wants that. Least of all, me.

I'm sorry. I'm just telling you the truth. Someone has to. But there is some good news.

Dare to Fail Gloriously

Running a game is a performance. You're putting on a show. That means, the more energy and passion you put into it, the better it will

be. And since you already know your first game will suck, there's no reason to hold anything back. Go all in. Dare to fail gloriously.

Now, the players will be judging you. But they won't be judging you as bad as you're judging yourself. And even a bland, mediocre RPG session is a lot of fun. Role-playing games are pretty unique experiences. If the players really get into it, they are going to get swept up. They won't notice the stammering and stuttering. They won't notice your confusion and your screaming terror. So, if you can at least be excited and energetic, they won't notice everything you're doing wrong. Dare to fail gloriously.

You're going to do a bad job. But if you do that bad job right, no one will care except you. And if you keep doing the bad job right, you'll actually start to believe you're doing a good job. And then you really will be doing a good job. And you'll stop judging yourself. Eventually. Someday.

But someday is in the future. Right now, you've got to focus on one game. The first game. And even though you know it's going to be bad, I am going to help you limit just how bad it can be.

Eye on the Prize

Game Masters — GMs — do a lot of different things. They wear a lot of different hats and they draw on a lot of different skills. But, for your first game, you want to limit the number of hats you have to wear. So, you're going to focus your first game on learning just three things: how to manage the RPG conversation, how to narrate, and how to adjudicate.

The **RPG conversation** describes the basic flow of the game. It's the turn order. Lots of games have turn orders. In *Hearthstone*, for example, on each turn you gain a mana crystal, draw a card, play some cards, and end your turn. Well, RPGs have a turn order too. It's a loose turn order, but it's there. It's called the basic role-playing game conversation.

Narration is the art of communication with your players. It's telling them what's going on in the world, inviting them to take action, and then describing the results.

Adjudication means figuring out what happens when the players do take actions. It's using your brain and the rules to determine what happens next in the game.

There's lots of other stuff that can also come up during a role-playing game session. Stuff like improvising new scenes, introducing the consequences of player choices, pacing the game, managing tension, maintaining tone, adjusting challenge, and so on. But that's all advanced stuff. Stuff you'll figure out later. For your first session, you just want to make sure you learn three things: how to manage the RPG conversation, how to narrate, and how to adjudicate.

I'm going to explain each of the skills in **Chapter 5**. For now, I just want you to know that the whole point of your first session is to learn those three skills. And nothing else. And hopefully, now you'll understand why I'm about to say what I'm about to say.

Keep it Simple, Stupid!

If you've played RPGs before, you won't like this advice. Tough. This advice will help you focus on what you need to learn to run a game.

Keep it simple, stupid.

Run the simplest game you can run. Keep everything on a tight leash. Keep it constrained. I know that sounds crazy. After all, the first part of this book was all about how great it is that RPGs are so open-ended and free and unconstrained. Yeah, well, cars set you free too. But, when you're learning to drive, you do it in a parking lot where there's nothing to hit and no one to kill.

So, keep it simple, stupid. Focus on the basics and you won't kill anyone.

What's simple?

Premade Characters, Simple Adventure, No Follow Up

First, limit the character options. Do not invite the players to make their own characters. Yes: I know making characters is fun. But, for your first game, you're going to let the players pick from a roster of premade characters. They can name the character, if they want, and decide what they look like, but all the statistics — the character sheets — will be filled out in advance. That way, you know exactly what every character can do. There won't be any surprises. And you'll have fewer rules to deal with.

Second, pick a simple adventure module. Adventures come in a lot of different flavors. You can have huge, sprawling, complicated, multipart adventures about solving mysteries and dealing with political intrigue. And you can have simple, straightforward adventures with stories like "there are goblins in that cave; fix that." You want that second kind. A dungeon crawl. There's a place to explore, some monsters to fight, some treasures to gather, and a simple goal. You'll have time later for the big, complicated stuff.

Third, you want your first game to be a one-time deal. Or maybe a two-time deal. At most. That is, the players should be able to complete the adventure module in one or two game sessions. And once the adventure is over, there's no follow up. No continuing story. No second part. Nothing. We call that a one-shot adventure.

After you run your first game — assuming you and your players want to do it again — you can start fresh. You can make your own characters, run a more complex adventure module, and spread the game over weeks or months. But you don't want to start with that. First, because your first session is going to go badly. You know that. Starting fresh lets you leave all your mistakes behind. Second, you're not asking your players to commit to anything until after they've played the first game. If you ask for a commitment up front, they won't just judge the game they're playing, they will judge whether the game they are playing is good enough to keep doing it forever. That creates a lot more pressure. Pressure is the opposite of simple.

Don't Run an Adventure You're Attached To

As a Game Master, you have the option of creating your own adventure modules. And that's a lot of the fun of being a GM: creating your own games and worlds and characters and stories. At least, for some people. I love that stuff.

But that's not simple. That's pressure. Why? Because when you create your own stuff, you get attached to it. Emotionally. And if you run it badly, you're going to be upset. If your first game is just some twenty-dollar adventure module you don't care about, you won't worry about screwing it up. But if it's a work of art you spent ten hours creating, you're going to care. A lot. Too much.

Once again, keep it simple. You can create your own stuff later. For now, just focus on not running your first game so badly that people end up in the hospital.

Not that that will happen.

It almost never happens.

Gathering Your Supplies Before Setting Forth

Now that you understand your goals and you're committed to keeping it simple, it's time to figure out what you actually need to run your first game. If you've already read **Chapter 3**, you've already got a basic shopping list. But let's go over it again in detail.

First, you need the actual game rules for whatever game you'd like to run. Maybe *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Pathfinder*. Specifically, you need the core rules. For *D&D*, that means you need the *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook* and *Monster Manual*. You can skip the *Dungeon Master's Guide* for now. If you want to run *Pathfinder*, you need the *Pathfinder Core Rulebook* and the *Bestiary*. If you don't want to shell out a bunch of cash, Wizards of the Coast lets you download a set of free, basic rules from the official *D&D* website. You can also get the *Pathfinder* core rules free online in the form of a *System Reference Document*, but that's kind of a mess and hard to work with.

Next, you need some polyhedral, RPG dice. You can find them online by searching for "polyhedral dice" or "RPG dice." You can also buy them in most comic book and game stores. They come in standard, seven-die sets. If your players have never played a role-playing game before, you'll need some extra sets of dice for them to use.

You will also need an actual adventure module to run. For *Pathfinder*, you can get a number of inexpensive modules online at Paizo's website. I like *Crypt of the Everflame*. It's a great starter adventure. Finding a good starter module for *D&D* is trickier because they don't publish short, simple modules anymore. They are focusing on big, complicated adventures. Maybe that will have changed by the time you're reading this book.

However, being the awesome guy that I am, I've written an introductory module that works for a variety of different game systems to go along with this book. And I'm happy to give it away for free. If you visit *TheAngryGM.com/GameAngry*, you can download the module as a PDF. And mine is specifically designed to help walk you through running your first game. You're welcome.

You'll also need some premade characters. Paizo and Wizards of the Coast both have some premade characters available on the official *Pathfinder* and *Dungeons & Dragons* websites. And, if you download the module I wrote, you'll be happy to discover that it includes a bunch of premade characters too. Because, again, I'm awesome. Both Paizo and Wizards of the Coast also offer premade characters on their respective websites. And you can also make the premade characters yourself by following the character creation rules in your game of choice. It's not that hard and it can help you get familiar with the game rules.

I should also mention that both Paizo and Wizards of the Coast publish boxed sets that contain simplified copies of the core rules for *Pathfinder* and *Dungeons & Dragons*. They also include dice, an adventure module, premade characters, some maps, and some other goodies. Those are called the *Dungeons & Dragons Starter Set* and the *Pathfinder Beginner Box*. Personally, I like the *Pathfinder* box better. The adventure is shorter, and the rules are clearer. But they are both good products and they've got everything you need to get started.

Finally, you need three to five players. You can technically run an RPG session with as many or as few people as you want, but they run best with three to five players. Now, I can't tell you where to get players. If you have some friends, you could ask them to play. But if you don't already have some friends, you'll have to figure out how to make some for yourself. I can't help with that. It's not that sort of book. If friends aren't an option for you, well, I'm not going to suggest kidnapping anyone. But it does work. And if you get

arrested, that could help too. Role-playing games are becoming very popular diversions in American prisons.

I'm just kidding. Don't kidnap anyone. And please don't sue me.

Preparing Yourself for Adventure

Once you've got your supplies, it's time to prepare for your first game. That means you have to do three things: you have to learn the rules of the game, you have to familiarize yourself with the adventure module, and you have to learn how to be a Game Master. Now, you have me to help you with that third part. And that's good. Because the rulebooks are very bad about that. The rulebooks tell you all the rules of the game in long, painful detail. But they don't tell you how to actually sit down and run a game.

As for learning the rules and reviewing the adventure module? Well, you've got some reading to do. If you already know the rules because you played in some other Game Master's game, you only have to skim the rules to make sure you've got them down.

I'm going to be honest: learning the rules isn't fun. Those rulebooks are long and boring, and they are filled with lots of tiny, piddling rules that never come up. But you can't tell which rules are important and which ones you can ignore because you've never run a game before. But, if you've read **Chapter 1**, you have some idea which rules are important. Ability checks, skill checks, hit points, saving throws, and combat are the big ones. Just remember, the rules I used in **Chapter 1** were generic rules. Make sure you review the specific rules of the game you're running.

Now, it's important to know the rules, but you don't have to memorize every rule. Most of the rules are for very specific situations. And those specific rules build on the more general rules of ability checks and stuff. It's okay to be fuzzy on the details as long as you know how to make ability checks and skill checks and how combat works in general. This is where the *Starter Set* and *Beginner's Box* are actually really useful. They cut out all the extraneous detailed garbage and focus on the general rules.

In the end, though, you have to read the rules and the adventure module at least once. That sucks. But it's worth it. And once you've got a handle on the rules and reviewed the adventure module, you can continue reading this much more fun and interesting book about how to actually run a game with all of that crap.

I'll wait.

Chapter 5:

How to Be a GM in Four Easy Steps

Role-playing games seem complicated and confusing. There's a lot of reasons for that. But the biggest reason is that RPG rulebooks are filled with lots of rules and there's no explanation for how to use those rules. And, for some reason, gamers don't think that's strange.

When you read the rules to a board game, you get more than rules. You get a whole step-by-step procedure. And a goal. First, the rules tell you what the point of the game is. Then, they explain the steps you follow on each turn. Then, they explain the actions you can take on your turn. Then, they explain how to resolve those actions. RPG rulebooks skip the goals and the process and go straight into how to resolve your actions.

That's because the rules in an RPG are tools. Tools that the Game Master uses to run a game. The GM makes the game happen and uses the rules only when he needs to figure out what happens when a player takes a specific action. That's why I wrote this book. This book won't teach you the rules of *Pathfinder* or *Dungeons & Dragons*. It won't tell you what exact dice to roll when Zarole Skyi wants to build a harness for the baby dragon the heroes just captured to

create a living, shoulder-mounted flame-thrower. Instead, it'll tell you how to use the rules as tools to determine for yourself what happens the first time Zarole pulls that dragon's tail.

It'll probably involve Zarole screaming a lot and some questions about which healing spells will help Zarole grow a new face.

Being a GM is not really hard. You just have to understand how the game flows and how to maintain that flow. And when and how to use the rules of the game. Once you've got that down, you can run pretty much any role-playing game. Because they all work the same way. They all start with the Basic RPG Conversation.

The Basic RPG Conversation

Whatever the rules might imply, every role-playing game is played out as a conversation between the GM and the players. And the conversation always starts with the GM describing the situation the heroes find themselves in.

> ***Game Master:*** *"You're standing on a winding road that leads to the Grisly Cave of Death. The journal of a long dead adventurer's sister's second cousin's barber suggests that the adventurer left a fortune in stolen gold coins in the cave. Since you have nothing better to do, you've decided to search for the treasure."*

Next, the GM invites the players to act.

> ***GM:*** *"You are following the road through the Forest of a Thousand Horrific Monsters when, suddenly, there's a rustling in the underbrush ahead. A bristling spider-cat leaps out of the forest. It lowers itself to the ground, tail twitching, fur rising on its back, mandibles clacking beneath its five, beady, red eyes. It's going to pounce! What do you do?"*

Now, one of the players will speak up and describe the action they want their hero to attempt.

> ***Nathan (as Therrinn):*** *"Therrinn leaps courageously backwards behind Azil in case there's another spider-cat moving into a flanking position behind us. Using Azil as cover, I fire an arrow at the spider-cat from my bow."*

The GM assesses the action and determines the outcome. And here is where the GM uses the rules of the game as tools to determine what happens.

> ***GM:*** *"Okay. Make an attack roll. The spider-cat has an Armor Class 16. If you hit, roll for damage."*
> ***Nathan:*** *[Rolls Dice] "Uh oh."*

After determining the outcome, the GM describes the result, explains how the situation has changed, and invites the players to take further action.

> ***GM:*** *"Your arrow whistles past the spider-cat and disappears into the forest. You hear the squawk of some unlucky bird in the distance. The spider-cat isn't amused. It leaps straight at Azil, retractable claws extending from its eight paws as it flies through the air. What do you do?"*

And that's it. That's how to run a role-playing game. It's just four steps.

1. *Describe the situation*
2. *Invite the players to act*
3. *Determine the outcome of the players' actions*
4. *Do it over and over until the heroes win or die.*

See? It's not that hard. And that whole conversation involves just two basic skills: Narration and Adjudication. Narrating involves describing the situation and inviting the players to act. Determining the outcome of the players' actions is called Adjudication. The last part about doing it over and over? That involves some lesser, non-gaming skills called Patience and Bladder Control which you already should have mastered. For the rest of this chapter, I will be explaining Narration and Adjudication.

The Art of Narration

You are the players' eyes, ears, and brains. Everything the players know about the world their heroes inhabit, everything they see, hear, and sense comes from you. Because the game's world only exists inside your brain, part of your job is to put it into their brains. Narration is the art of taking the world in your brain and cramming it into the players' brains so they can decide how their heroes act.

That's important. The players are going to use everything you tell them that the heroes see, hear, sense, and know to make choices. Those choices will hopefully bring the heroes closer to their goals. Goals which you provided. Because they are also part of the game. Good choices will help the heroes defeat their enemies and overcome whatever challenges they face. Bad choices will hinder the heroes. They might even kill the heroes. For the players to enjoy that experience, they have to believe the game is fair. They need to know that, if they make the best choices, they will probably win. And if they make stupid choices, they'll probably lose.

If they stop thinking the game is fair, they'll realize that their choices don't matter. They can't change the outcome. If they can't win, they'll get frustrated. If they can't lose, they'll get bored. And if

they have no idea what leads to winning and what leads to losing, they will just act randomly. Those aren't good things.

Point is, a good game starts with you — the Game Master — making sure the players have all the information they need about the world around them to make good choices. You need good communication skills because poor communication kills. It kills heroes. It kills fun. It kills games.

You might be used to reading fantasy books. Those things are full of flowery, descriptive prose. Take *the Lord of the Rings* for example. Ever read that? That thing is just full of dull, complex, descriptive garbage. Now, that's okay. It's a book. If you hit a long, unclear passage with a bunch of words you aren't sure you understand, you can just guess what it means. Or skip it. Who cares? But if you're playing a game and those words are all that you know about the world around you, you'd better understand it all. Or else you'll lose.

There's a difference between talking and communicating. Talking is making noises that sound like language with your mouth. Talking is babbling about the weather or the local sports franchise or the restaurant you went to last night or the strange growth you have in a very private place. Communicating means passing information to someone else. Clearly and concisely.

When you're narrating, you have to communicate. Talking isn't good enough.

Be Brief and Act Natural

Lots of GMs try to imitate their favorite fantasy books when they are narrating. They think it makes the game better if they are as descriptive as possible. It doesn't. It just makes the game boring and confusing. Lots of GMs also try to sound "authentic" by peppering their narration with anachronistic garbage. Everything is "ye old" this and "thou art" that. And that just confuses everyone.

> ***GM:*** *"As you meander down the antediluvian cobbled cartway, your vigilance is vexed by the hummocks and knolls through which your passage wends. Your auditory members are assailed, suddenly, by the keening of a zephyr that flits through the air around you.*
> ***Player:*** *"A keening zephyr? Is it attacking? What do we do?!"*
> ***GM:*** *"It's a breeze. Wind. The wind is whistling through the hills.*
> ***Player:*** *"Why didn't you just say that?"*

When you're narrating, talk like you're getting charged by the word. Because you are. Every word you use brings the players one step closer to boring. Use words sparingly. And use words that come naturally to you. You ain't Shakespeare and your players are trying to play a game, not pass English class.

Don't Hide Important Details

You are your players' eyes and ears, right? So, you have a duty to tell the players everything they see and hear and know. Especially if it would affect their decisions. If a volcano dragon is so hot that anyone who tries to engage it in a fight will be horribly burned, the players deserve to know that before they burst into flames. If you were walking toward something hot enough to literally kill you, you'd feel the heat long before you got close enough for your eyebrows to smart smoldering. And you'd see the heat shimmer around the thing. If you withhold information like that, it makes the players think you're trying to trick them. Don't do that.

Whenever you're not sure whether to tell the players something, tell them. If you aren't sure, err on the side of telling them too much. If you tell them too little, you are teaching them they can't trust their own senses. Or they can't trust you. That's a bad lesson to teach.

Don't Make the Players Press X to Continue

You might think that if you make the players ask for information, it makes them feel like they are doing something. Or it makes narration less boring. It doesn't work like that.

> ***GM:*** *"By the side of the road is a strange object, partially hidden by weeds and shrubs."*
> ***Player:*** *"What is it?"*
> ***GM:*** *"It looks like a signpost. It has something written on it."*
> ***Player:*** *"What's written on it?"*
> ***GM:*** *"Well, it says 'Beware: Spider-Cats Ahead'. And there's a strange symbol scratched into the post too."*
> ***Player:*** *"A symbol? What does it look like?"*
> ***And so on...***

You're not a video game. You don't need the players to keep pressing the button to advance the dialogue box. Anyone can see a sign for what it is. And the moment they are close enough to read it, they know what it says. Don't make the players jump through stupid hoops to get the information they should have.

The Four Kinds of Narration

Technically, anytime you're communicating with the players, you're narrating. But, because role-playing games follow a pretty regular pattern — the RPG Conversation — there are really only four types of narration.

First, there's Exposition. **Exposition** is direct narration. You're giving the players information that the heroes have in their heads. Most adventures start with a little bit of Exposition to tell the players what the heroes are trying to accomplish and why.

> ***GM:*** *"You're standing on a winding road that lead to the Grisly Cave of Death. The journal of a long dead adventurer's sister's second cousin's barber suggests that the adventurer left a fortune in stolen gold coins in the cave. Since you have nothing better to do, you've decided to search for the treasure."*

Second, there's narration that Sets the Scene. **Scene Setting** narration is there to tell the players what they can see, hear, smell, feel, or otherwise sense about the situation they are in right now.

> ***GM:*** *"You are following the road through the Forest of a Thousand Horrific Monsters when, suddenly, there's a rustling in the underbrush ahead. A bristling spider-cat leaps out of the forest. It lowers itself to the ground, tail twitching, fur rising on its back, mandibles clacking beneath its five, beady, red eyes. It's going to pounce! What do you do?"*

Scene Setting narration usually ends by inviting the players to act. I'll tell you about that under the next heading.

After the heroes take some kind of action, you use narration to **Describe the Outcome**. It's your way of telling the players what happened as a result of their actions.

> ***GM:*** *"Your arrow whistles past the spider-cat and disappears into the forest. You hear the squawk of some unlucky bird in the distance."*

And, after you Describe the Outcome, you use a little snippet of Scene Setting narration to tell the players how the situation has changed because of what they did.

> ***GM:*** *"The spider-cat isn't amused. It leaps straight at Azil, retractable claws extending from its eight paws as it flies through the air. What do you do?"*

Of course, the players are invited to act again and you Describe the Outcome and Set the Scene again. Round and round it goes until the scene is played out. For example, the combat with the spider-cat will continue until the spider-cat has killed everyone. Or it's dead. Or it runs away. Or the heroes run away. Once that's done, it's time for a new scene. And you use a bit of narration called a **Transition** to describe how the players get from one scene to the next, usually by describing the passage of time or movement from place to place.

> ***GM:*** *"Leaving the corpse of the spider-cat behind, you head into the forest. The forest presses close on all sides and you feel like you're being watched as you walk for several hours."*

Hopefully, you know what happens next. That's right. You have to Set the Scene again and invite the players to act.

> ***GM:*** *"Eventually, you come to a broad clearing around an ancient fountain. A statue of an elf maiden pours water from a jug into a pool. A few lilies float on the surface of the clear water. The road continues past the fountain and into the trees at the far side of the clearing. What do you do?"*

Exposition is pretty simple. It's just stating clear, direct information. Describing the Outcome is easy once you know how to Adjudicate Actions. Which I'll get to in a bit. Transitions simply cover the camera cuts between one moment in the story and the next. That's all easy. But Setting the Scene can be tricky. That's where GMs get tripped up. They forget to be brief and speak naturally. They start talking like a high school goth at a poetry slam.

As a rule, I like to limit my Scene Setting to three to five sentences. The first sentence describes the overall scene, like the clearing in a forest. The rest of the sentences call out interesting details in the scene. Like the statue, the lilies, and the continuing road. You don't have to follow the formula exactly, but it'll keep your Scene Setting under control.

The most important thing to remember when Setting the Scene, though, is always invite your players to act.

An Invitation to Action

Role-playing games are about how imaginary heroes deal with hypothetical situations. They are about the players' choices. Their actions. If the heroes in your game aren't taking any actions, there's not really a game at all. Basically, you're just reciting a terrible audiobook about characters who don't do anything. Probably written by Robert Jordan.

You must always invite the heroes to act. The easiest way is to end every bit of scene setting narration with a clear question like "what do you do?" That tells the players it's time for them to step up and tell you what exciting, crazy, stupid actions the heroes are taking right now.

But just asking the players what the heroes do every few minutes isn't really inviting the heroes to act. Imagine, for example, that the heroes are walking down the road to the Cave of Grisly Death.

> ***GM:*** *"You walk a few feet down the road. It continues into the distance ahead of you. What do you do?"*
> ***Player:*** *"We keep walking down the road."*
> ***GM:*** *"Okay. You walk a few feet down the road. It continues into the distance ahead of you. What do you do?"*

That's not inviting the heroes to act. The heroes chose to act when they started walking down the road. What you're doing is stopping them every few minutes to ask them if they've changed their minds.

As a GM, you move the action from scene to scene, not from moment to moment. You describe what's going on and you stop describing and ask for an action when there's actually some action to take. Some choice to make.

A spider-cat jumps out of the brush and attacks? What do you do. There's a strange fountain in a place you didn't expect? Do you examine it or keep walking? The road splits now. Do you go left or right? There's a young prince fleeing from a searing hot volcano dragon? Do you take action or just ignore them?

Whenever you Set the Scene, the last line of the narration — before you say, "what do you do?" — should always dare the heroes to do something. It should invite them to act. To choose. It's as simple as that. Get that down and you've got Narration down. And then you just have to worry about what to do when the players actually do act.

The Art of Adjudication

Eventually, one of your players will get tired of listening to your narration. And then, they're going to act. That is, they are going to make a choice about what their hero does in the world. They might fire an arrow at a spider-cat, choose a fork in the road, drink from the fountain, or try to creep away quietly while the dragon is distracted with its royal meal. And after they tell you what action they want to take in the world, the player is going to look to you to tell them what happens.

Adjudication is the art of figuring out what happens whenever the heroes do anything in the world. Does the action work? Do they get what they want? Do they fail? What happens as a result? And this is where the rules of the game come in. Or, rather, where they might come in. Because the rules of the game are just tools. They help you Adjudicate. They help you resolve actions. And they help you resolve actions in a fair, consistent way.

Fairness and consistency are important. That's why I keep repeating those two words. I hope you noticed. Fairness and consistency are the things that keep the players from getting bored or frustrated or behaving at random. Because the rules help you stay fair and consistent, you should try to use them whenever they are useful. But that doesn't mean you should use them all the time. And it doesn't mean obeying them blindly. You can choose not to use the rules. And you can change the rules. As long as you're being fair and consistent.

Overusing the Rules

The most basic rule in both *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder* is that, whenever someone does something, you roll 1d20 and add either their Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, or Charisma modifier to the result. Then, compare the total to a Difficulty Class to see if the action succeeds or fails.

But what constitutes an action? Does getting out of bed need a die roll? Does walking down a street need a die roll? Does eating your lunch without choking to death need a die roll? No. And even though rolling dice is fun, if you stop the action too often for pointless die rolls, you're going to ruin the game. Die rolls aren't the game. Choices are the game. Die rolls just determine the outcomes of important choices. If you try to make die rolls the game, you have a game that's completely random and completely boring.

That's why, adjudicating actions is about using your brain first and the rules second. Or not at all.

How to Adjudicate an Action

When a player tells you what they want their hero to do in response to some situation, the hero is attempting an action. And when a hero — or any creature in the game — attempts an action, you — the GM — need to Adjudicate the Action. You need to determine what happens.

Say the heroes are in the Cave of Grisly Death. They've found a small chamber where a terror bear is curled up, asleep. No one wants to deal with the terror bear, which is the third worst kind of bear to deal with. Trust me. But, just as they are about to pass right by on by the chamber, the heroes spy a glittering ruby lying on the floor on the far side of the bear's lair. Leroy the Goblin Rogue (formerly known as 42), who cares more about dollars than sense, wants the ruby. Being the sneaky sort, he wants to creep quietly across the chamber, hugging the wall, and retrieve the jewel without waking the bear.

So, what happens?

Whenever you have to adjudicate an action, you start by figuring out what the player is trying to accomplish. Leroy wants to grab the ruby without waking the terror bear. Which is the third worst kind of bear. Trust me.

If Leroy is successful, the heroes have a ruby and they don't have to fight a bear. If not, he wakes the bear and the party has an 800-pound, furry, clawed problem on their hands.

Those are the possible outcomes of the action. They define what happens if the heroes get what they want and if the heroes fail to get what they want.

Next, you determine how the hero is trying to accomplish their goal. That's called the approach. Leroy is trying to get past the bear without waking it by sneaking quietly along the edge of the room.

In general, whenever a player announces some action their hero is going to attempt, you are looking to figure out the outcome — what the hero is hoping to accomplish — and the approach — how the hero expects to accomplish it. And you can almost always state it as "the hero is trying to accomplish the outcome by using the approach."

If you ever find yourself struggling to figure out what the players are trying to do or how they are trying to do it, ask the players. Make sure you have it right. You'd be amazed how often players fail to explain what they want to accomplish or how they intend to accomplish it. Players can be dumb.

Once you know the approach and the desired outcome, you have to ask yourself two questions. Can the approach actually succeed in bringing about the desired outcome? And could the approach actually fail to bring about the desired outcome?

Could sneaking quietly past the bear actually allow Leroy to get the ruby without waking the bear? Yes. That could work. Could sneaking past the bear actually result in the bear waking up? Yes. The bear might hear Leroy anyway. He might sneeze or stumble. Or the bear might not be sleeping very deeply at the moment.

If you answer yes to both questions, you should use the rules of the game to determine the outcome. In *D&D* and *Pathfinder*, that usually means rolling an ability check and comparing the result to a DC you set. But if you answer no to either question, don't bother using the rules. You already know the outcome.

For example, if Leroy was particularly dumb and decided to just stomp straight through the cave right past the bear with no attempt at stealth, you would say no, that can't possibly work. There is no way he can get the gem without waking up the bear simply by ignoring the bear and walking across the cave. The action is impossible. No die roll is needed.

Alternatively, imagine Sävis is tired of all of this sneaking around and itching for a fight. While Leroy is sneaking past the bear, she pitches a rock at the bear, hoping to wake it up. Sävis didn't become a barbarian to not fight terror bears, after all.

What's the outcome? Either the bear wakes up or it doesn't. What's the approach? Sävis wants to wake the bear up by throwing a rock at it. Could that work? Absolutely. No question. Could it fail? That's not very likely. Even if the rock misses the bear, the noise of the rock will still startle the bear awake. Terror bears have excellent senses. So, no die roll is needed. The bear wakes up. And terror ensues.

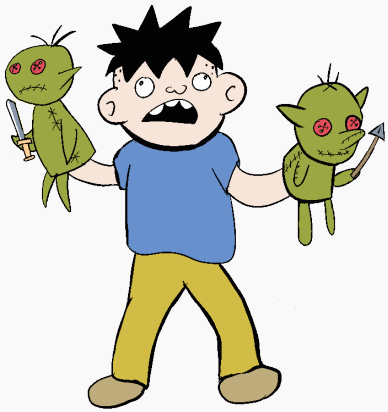
By the way, when you're asking yourself whether an action can succeed and whether it can fail, it's important to be reasonable and consider only what is likely to happen. It is entirely possible that you might choke to death on a carrot while eating your dinner. But it's pretty unlikely. And it's possible that Sävis' rock might miss and might not be loud enough to wake the bear. But, again, that's not likely. The point is to only resort to the dice and the game rules when you can't determine the outcome any other way.

Action Adjudication is pretty easy to get a handle on. It's a simple process. Use your brain first, assess the action, then follow the rules of the game when necessary. There is more to Action Adjudication. But that's advanced stuff. Not worth worrying about in your first game. I'll cover it in **Chapter 10**.

Lather, Rinse, Repeat

If you understand the RPG Conversation, if you can Narrate, and if you Adjudicate Actions, you're ready to run your first role-playing game session. Because that's all it is. Describe the scene, invite the players to act, adjudicate the action, describe the results. Over and over and over.

But there is one part of the game where the whole conversation becomes a lot more complicated and the rules of the game can really trip you up. Unfortunately, it comes up a lot. Fortunately, it's what the next chapter is all about.



Chapter 6:

Let's You and Them Fight

Eventually, a fight is going to break out in your game. Not between your players. Hopefully. And not between you and your players either. Well, that can happen. Players can be stupid. And sometimes you lose your temper. But I'm talking about a fight breaking out in the game. Eventually, a fight will break out between the heroes of the story and the bad guys. And eventually, it's going to happen a lot.

Fantasy RPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder* are action games. The heroes are pretty much constantly fighting orcs and skeletons and goblins and trolls and demons and slimes and manticores and evil wizards and giant spiders and, of course, dragons. Those battles — which we call combat encounters — can be the most exciting parts of the game. They can also be some of the most complicated.

See, there's a lot at stake in combat. They are usually life or death battles. So, the rulebooks go into a lot of detail and provide a lot of fiddly little rules. That's to keep everything fair. But things can get bogged down if you let them. Combat is supposed to be fast and

exciting. It should feel like a fast-paced struggle against impossible odds. It shouldn't feel like a chess game that's been stalled out because of an argument over when you can *castle* your rook *en pessant* during a *three-fold repetition*. Or whatever happens in chess. I don't play chess. It's boring.

So, how do you keep complicated battles feeling fast and exciting? Apart from knowing the rules?

Your Battle Helmets

As a GM, there's four things you must do to run a good battle. Four hats you wear. First, you wear your referee hat. You have to know the rules and adjudicate actions fairly. You're always wearing that hat. Second, you wear the cool spikey helmet of playing the bad guys. The monsters? The villains? Those are your characters in battle. And you have to bring them to life. Third, you wear one of those green accountant visor thingies because you have to keep track of a lot of information. You have to know whose turn it is and who goes next. You have to keep track of how many hit points the monsters have left. All that stuff. And fourth, you have to wear the hat of keeping the action moving. It's probably one of those horse jockey hats. You have to keep the game moving.

The Referee Hat

During a combat encounter, a lot of extra rules come into play. Everyone takes turns, for example. And everyone gets one turn for each round of combat. And everyone can take one action and move a certain distance on each of their turns. That's because each round of combat only represents a few seconds of actual battle. There's also a lot of predefined actions with specific rules for resolving them. There are specific rules for attacking enemies, casting spells, taking cover, disarming foes, and so on. And every character — every hero and every villain — has some special abilities they can break out in a fight. Barbarians can fly into a battle rage. Rogues can ambush enemies. Dragons can breathe fire. Bards can sing magical songs that make everyone feel slightly better. Yeah, bards suck.

Before you get too overwhelmed, just remember that all those special rules are just specific uses of the rules you already know. Every action in *D&D* and *Pathfinder* is still resolved by rolling a d20, adding an ability modifier, and applying other bonuses and penalties. Even the initiative roll that determines who goes first is just a Dexterity check.

You definitely should read the combat rules a few times to prepare for your first game. Those rules are going to come up a lot. But don't sweat them too much. Because action adjudication is still action adjudication. As long as you know how to resolve an action,

it's okay to screw up some of the combat details. Action adjudication doesn't change just because the actions are about killing dragons and bards. You still have to listen and think before you ask for a die roll. And if you forget the specific rules for, say, a running tackle, just fall back on what you already know. Can the barbarian tackle a goblin? Can he succeed? Can he fail? What ability is in play? Strength? Just use a Strength check. It's close enough.

Don't forget to describe the outcomes of every action clearly and concisely. If someone stabs an orc with their sword and does a lot of damage, tell them "you run the orc through with your sword. It's bleeding badly. It's still fighting, but it can't take another hit like that." If the attack doesn't do much damage, say "you graze the orc, giving it a flesh wound on the shoulder. It shrugs off the attack and keeps fighting."

While you don't want the fight to get bogged down with rules, sometimes it's worth looking something up to make sure you're doing it right. Again, you have to use your brain first. Ask yourself if a situation is important enough to put the whole game on pause while you check a rule book. If the players are finishing off the last goblin after a long battle, it's probably not a good time to break out the rules. But if one of the heroes is probably going to die based on how that magical spell works, there's enough at stake that you want to be sure.

Use your brain, be consistent, and be fair. And if you are going to make a mistake, make it for the players. Not against them.

The Monster Helmet

When a fight breaks out, it's your job to be the bad guys. And I mean it. You need to be the monsters. Be the villains. The baddies are your characters. And if you want a tense, exciting fight, those baddies have to feel real. They have to feel bad. They have to act the way the players expect them to act.

When a monster's turn comes up, think about the monster. What does it want? Why is it fighting? How hurt is it? Look at its hit points. What can it do? Look at its statistics. What's the best move it can make right now to get what it wants. Be a player. Imagine the situation, treat the monster as your character, and make the best decision for the monster in that situation. Playing monsters in combat is a lot of fun.

Just don't get too attached.

The game is stacked against the monsters. RPGs are designed to give the heroes the edge. The fights are meant to be challenging, but winnable. If the players make a few mistakes, the heroes are going to get hurt, but they are unlikely to die. Of course, if the players make a lot of stupid mistakes or act really carelessly, that's a different story.

The point is, you can play the monsters to win. You can try your hardest to beat the heroes. That's what the monsters would do. And that makes them seem like real, dangerous threats. When you're wearing your monster helmet, don't be afraid to be a monster. Play it up. But always keep your referee hat under your monster helmet. Never stop being fair. Don't use the rules against the players. Play the monsters as if they want to win, but make sure everyone has to follow the same rules.

The Accounting Visor

Battles can be big, complicated things. And it can seem like there's a lot to keep track of. But the truth is, there's just three major things you have to pay attention to. You need to know where everyone is, you need to know whose turn it is, and you need to know the status of the monsters. That is, how many hit points do they have and do they have any conditions or effects helping or hindering them.

Keeping track of the battlefield — where everyone is in relation to everyone and everything else — is pretty easy if you use a map. Your adventure module might include poster maps for the major combat encounters. And it might include tokens as well. Or you might have access to a gridded map and tokens or miniature figures or some other play aid like I described in **Chapter 3**. If you're playing online, most virtual table-top programs like *Fantasy Grounds* have tools built in to keep track of the battlefield. I definitely recommend using some kind of visual aid. Otherwise, you have to keep track of everything in your head and you have to be very clear when describing the scene to the players. Even just a piece of graph paper with some pencil marks or coins on it is enough.

Keeping track of the turn order — the initiative count — is as easy as keeping a numbered list on a piece of paper. I just write a list of numbers down the side of a piece of paper and put the names of the heroes and monsters next the appropriate numbers. I write small, so I can use one piece of paper for several battles just by adding new columns each time a new fight breaks out. The piece of paper also gives you a place to keep track of hit points and other effects.

Other GMs use different methods to keep track of initiative. For some reason, people love to overcomplicate this particular non-problem. Some use index cards with the names of the heroes and the monsters written on them. They stack them up in turn order and flip through them as the turns go by. And you can write notes on those too. Some GMs use placards set out on the table. Some use standing boards with paperclips they can move to mark the current turn. And there's all sorts of crazy stuff like magnetic white boards with sliding tokens. Me? I don't understand why people need all of this crap to do

something that can be done with a list of numbers. But gamers love to waste money on useless junk.

Finally, you need to keep track of each monsters' hit point total. And you might need to keep track of special rules and conditions, like when a monster is poisoned or put to sleep or set on fire. That stuff happens. That's why I said not to get too attached to your bad guys. Heroes can be cruel.

If you're using a piece of paper to keep track of the turn order — or a stack of index cards — you can keep all of the notes you need right there. Simple solution. If you don't mind writing in your adventure module, you can track this stuff right on the monster stat blocks. If you desperately need something more complicated, you can put dice next to each token or miniature and count down the hit points by spinning the dice down.

It can get tricky to keep track of which identical monster is which when the party is fighting six goblins, for example. I like to number the tokens or miniatures to keep track of them. Silver *Sharpie* markers are great for writing **permanent** numbers on the black bases of plastic miniatures. If you're using simple cardboard or paper tokens, you can write the hit points right on the tokens. Experiment and find a solution that works for you.

The Jockey Hat

An epic fantasy battle is usually over in a few minutes. At least, in the game world. But at the game table, it can take fifteen minutes, a half hour, or more to play out. That's just how it goes. That's because playing a fantasy battle can get bogged down with all of the worst parts of role-playing gaming: paperwork, math, arguing about rules, drawing diagrams, arguing about rules, waiting for your turn, reading long passages from thick rulebooks, and arguing about the rules.

That's not what you want. You want a combat to feel fast-paced and exciting. The problem is, you can't actually avoid that boring, time wasting stuff. Rules have to be followed, dice have to be rolled, books have to be checked, information has to be tracked. You can minimize that stuff by making sure you're only doing it when it's absolutely necessary. Use your brain first, apply the rules as needed, and only look up what's truly important. And be brief, clear, and concise when narrating. That'll keep the fight moving.

But, if you really want to make your fights feel fast, furious, and frightening, there is something you can take control of. You can seize control of the basic RPG conversation and turbocharge that sucker to make combat feel like an out-of-control roller coaster.

The Basic RPG Conversation: Combat Encounter Edition

Remember the basic RPG conversation from **Chapter 5**? You should. It was only one chapter ago. Describe the situation, drive the players to act, resolve the action, describe the outcome, and start again? That's it.

Well, you don't stop using that conversation just because a fight breaks out. Even if you have maps and tokens and everyone can see everything, you don't stop describing the scene. And just because damage is measured in numbers and everyone knows how much damage everyone is taking, you don't stop describing the outcome. A fight doesn't feel tense and exciting because you rush through it. It feels fast and exciting because it actually is tense and exciting. It's urgent. It's nervewracking. And that comes from you driving the action.

All the boring stuff — the dice and rules and paperwork — that's all part of just one step. That's part of resolving the action. It has to be done, but it's a speedbump. And if you skip all the narration around the action resolution, all that's left is speedbumps. You don't get a smooth ride on a road that's nothing but speedbumps. And you sure as Hell don't get any speed up.

When the fight starts, set the scene. Be clear and be concise. But be exciting.

> *"Three orcs suddenly burst through the door. When they see you, they raise their swords and shields. One snarls something. You can't understand what it says, but you know it's a challenge. They are about fifty feet away, at the far end of the room, and there's a bunch of columns holding up the ceiling along the sides of the room."*

Now figure out whose turn it is. Roll initiative. Then, don't just say "it's Belver's turn; what do you do?" That's not driving the action. Driving the action means calling attention to something specific, something urgent, and challenging the player to act.

> *"The orc in the middle grins at Belver, raises his shield, and gets ready to charge. The other two follow suit. Belver, the orcs are about to charge at you and your friends. What do you do?"*

And then it's time for the other major speedbump in combat. It's time to wait for the player to talk.

Think Fast or Die

Once you've set the scene and driven the action and asked one of the players to act, that player is probably going to make some sort of noise. Something like "uhhh" or "durrrhhhh" or "pfffffff." It's the

same noise that one friend always makes when the waitress is taking everyone's order. You know, the friend who's never ready to order. Even though they took fifteen minutes to study the menu and they keep insisting they're ready. That noise is the noise that says, "okay, I'm thinking. Let me think."

Sometimes, though, the player makes a different noise. A noise that sounds like, "Uh, guys, I'm in trouble. I can't handle it if three orcs come right at me? What do you think I should do? I don't know what to do." That's the noise of someone who wants to discuss their tactics in committee.

Okay, now, use your imagination here. What would happen to someone who made either of those noises as three ravenous orcs came charging at them? Did you say: "they'd be dead six seconds later?" Ding ding ding! You got it right.

This is a huge speedbump. It makes combat feel slow. Long pauses and committee discussions are for boring chess games, not exciting fantasy battles. They are roads filled with speedbumps. Don't let them happen.

It can feel mean to push the players to act quickly. But it's important. Otherwise, your fights will get slower and slower as the players take longer and longer to act and spend more and more time in tactical discussion. If you hear either of those two noises, it's time for you to drive the action harder.

> *"There are three orcs that are literally seconds away from beheading Belver. Are you really standing there saying 'uhhhhh?' Is this really the time to have a group discussion about what to do?"*

You don't have to be a jerk about it, of course. But you do have to remind the players they are in a life-or-death struggle where seconds count. It's okay to give the players a few seconds to think, but don't let them start studying the menu and don't let them discuss their plans in committee. Eventually, they will pick up the pace. Even if they have to create a new character and start again before they learn.

Resolve, Then Describe

Once a player finally spits out some words that sounds like an action their character might try — like attacking an orc or bandaging an ally or running away — resolve the action using your brain, then the rules. Ask yourself if it can succeed. As if it can fail. Then, roll dice if appropriate. It's just action adjudication all over again. Do your best to use the specific combat rules, though. And then you're back to narrating.

Your description should lead into the next person's turn and it should drive that player to act. Describe the scene — or at least, how it has changed — and call attention to something important that needs to be dealt with immediately. Then ask for an action.

> *"Okay, Malnorath, it's your turn. The orcs are fighting your friends. Meanwhile, Belver is bleeding out on the ground a few feet from you. Without some first aid, he'll will probably be dead in a round. What do you do?"*

And then just keep doing that until the fight is over. Then, provide a transition out of the battle and into a new scene.

> *"The battle is over. The orcs are laying dead in heaps in the middle of the room. The rest of you bandage up Belver and Malnorath. A few minutes later, they regain consciousness. You can all search the room and the bodies or you can move on through the far door. What do you do?"*

Keep doing that, in combat and out of combat, and eventually you'll find yourself at the end of your first game. You'll think you did a terrible job. The players will have had a blast. And eventually, someone will look at you and ask, "now what?"

Chapter 7:

Now What?

So, you've run your first role-playing game. Good for you. Even though it sucked, go ahead and pat yourself on the back. And have a cookie. You deserve it. Running your first game is scary and confusing. But you did it anyway. And your players probably had a lot of fun. Eventually, you'll realize you had a lot of fun too.

After a few days have gone by and you've stopped beating yourself up over everything you did wrong, it's time to call up your players and ask for a second date. Assuming you want to do all of this again. And again. And again. For thirty years.

New Characters in a New Story

With your first game done and gone, you're going to want to start fresh. And even if you don't want to start fresh, you should start fresh. Trust me. No matter how much you — or your players — want to continue the story, start fresh. Your first game was just practice. And it sucked. Let it go.

One of the great joys of playing — not running — an RPG is playing a character you created for yourself. You probably noticed that the rulebooks describe in painful, excruciating detail the process of creating your own character from scratch. Seriously. That's half the *D&D Player's Handbook*. In fact, for some stupid reason, the rules usually tell you how to create your own character before they tell you how to actually play the game. That's why a person like me had to write a book like this. And why I'm so angry about it.

Now that it's time to start a new game, take some time to learn the character creation rules so you can help your players make their own characters. Meanwhile, you'll have to search around for a new adventure module. This is a great time to look into one of the longer, multi-part modules that I mentioned in **Chapter 3** and **Chapter 4**. Those things can give you a good six months of gaming. And they also show how the heroes grow in power by gaining experience levels and magical equipment. Players really like seeing their characters grow.

And you'll like growing too.

Sucking a Little Less Every Time

Every time you run a game, you'll get better at it. You'll get more familiar with the rules, more comfortable playing characters and monsters, and more willing to tell your players to hurry themselves the hell up in combat. At some point, you'll actually feel like you know what you're doing. And then it'll get really fun.

As you run more games, experiment. Try out different ways of keeping track of initiative and mapping the battlefield and tracking hit points. Eventually, you'll find a system that works for you. And you'll also develop your own style of narration. You'll find your voice, as we say in the business. And narrating the game will start to come naturally.

And as you start to enjoy running games, you'll start spending more time on the game when you aren't running the game.

Doing Your Homework

After you run your first game, it's a good idea to review the rules. And it's a good idea to review the rules before and after each game. If you forgot a specific rule during a session — like charging tackles — look it up afterwards so you remember it next time. If your next adventure involves an underwater battle with a demonic squidshark, review the underwater combat rules before the game.

Beyond that, you'll probably start talking to other GMs and seeking out GMing advice. There's a huge community out there. And there's a lot of blogs and podcasts and YouTube channels too. Heck, that's where this book came from. It's basically just a compilation of

the best advice I've ever written on my website at *TheAngryGM.com* over the last ten years.

Just be careful taking other people's advice. Even brilliant, charismatic, handsome, angry people's advice. GMing is a very personal thing. What works for one GM won't work for other GMs. Something that leads to a great game at one table won't fly with another group of players. And there is some genuinely bad advice out there from bad GMs who think they are good GMs. Listen to other people, be willing to try new things, but trust your gut. And if something doesn't work for you, stop doing it. Don't assume you're doing something wrong.

Trying New Games

After you've run a few games, you might find yourself getting bored of fantasy. You might want to try a science-fiction game or a post-apocalyptic game or a horror game or a game set in the Old West except that ancient, malevolent entities from other dimensions posing as gods are driving all the cowboys to madness. Yeah, that exists. Lots of games exist. Lots of weird, weird games. And each game system has its own rules and its own setting and its own genre. And different game systems even focus on different things. If you're tired of the action focus in fantasy RPGs, you might enjoy the mystery and intrigue in modern spy games or you might like the diplomacy and kingdom-management aspects of some kingmaker game. But, despite all the differences between different systems, they all work the same way at their core. They all follow the basic RPG conversation and rely on narration and action adjudication that comes from a human brain inside a brilliant Game Master.

Feel free to try new stuff out. Branch out. Try different things. There's a lot out there. And even if fantasy adventure isn't for you, something is bound to work out.

Your Own Story, Your Own World

RPGs aren't games, they're systems. They let you run games. But they also let you create games. And create worlds for those games to take place in. The core rules for *Pathfinder* and *Dungeons & Dragons* even contain the basic instructions you need to create your own adventures and worlds. While some GMs can be perfectly happy running published adventure modules week after week and year after year, others need to create. I don't run published adventures at all anymore. I create my own content. I create adventures, worlds, monsters, and even entire rule systems. And, at the rate I'm going, in another two years or so, I'll have built my own rule system. Check your local game store or my website. It might already exist. Depends on when you're reading this.

If you're the creative type, you're probably looking forward to the day when you're tormenting your players with your own impossible adventures filled with unimaginable monsters. Good for you. Just remember that you need some experience with how adventures are put together before you try to make your own. That's why you start off by running other people's games.

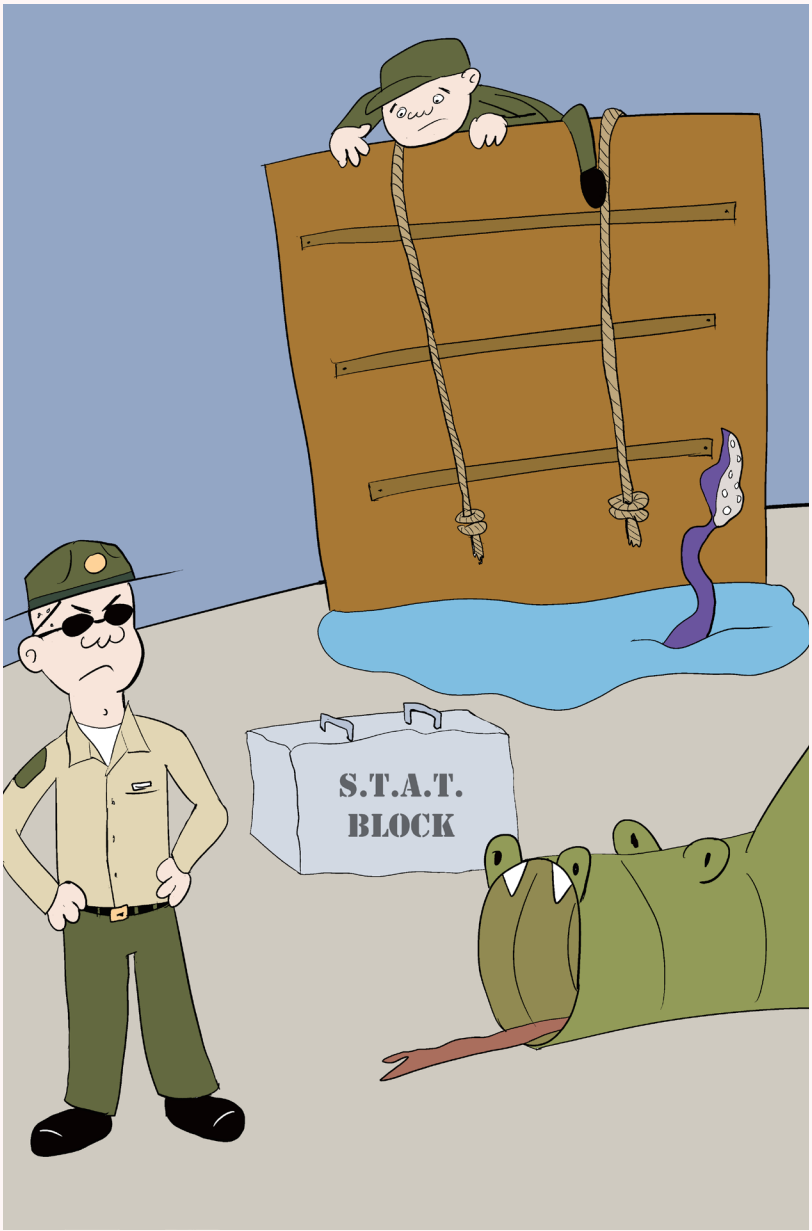
But just because you're running published modules, that doesn't mean you don't get to be creative. Start creating. Tweak the modules you're running. Change some of the encounters. Add some new scenes. Add or remove your own characters. The best way to learn how to create content is by personalizing the adventures you're running. It's good practice. Don't feel like you have to stick with what's written. It's your game. Make it your own.

Whatever you want to do, there's a lot of paths open to you. Whether you just want to run simple *Dungeons & Dragons* adventures for years or whether you want to create your own custom campaign set in an alternate World War II where Adolf Hitler is one of the masks of Nyarlathotep and the bombing of Battle of Midway woke up Cthulhu. But those paths and more all start with running a few games, mastering the basic skills, and getting better every time.

So, go. Go run games. Learn the basics. Get a bunch of games under your belt. Each game will be less worse than the last. And eventually, your games won't be terrible at all. And once you've gotten to the point where your games don't suck very much at all, come back and read **Part III** and learn how to make your games even less worse. Learn how to run the least worst games you can run.

Part III:

Running Less Worse Games



Chapter 8:

The Heart of the Game

Welcome Game Master! I know you think you have a handle on how to run a game. You understand the basic RPG conversation, you know how to narrate your game, you can adjudicate actions, and you can keep the action in your game flowing at a fast pace. Maybe you learned that all on your own. Or maybe you learned it by reading **Part II** of this book, running a game, and then running a bunch more. And getting a little less terrible at it each time. But now it's time for you to step up. To run even less worse games. To run the least worst games you can run. And maybe someday, you'll be able to run games that are so less worse they are actually good. Maybe you'll even run great games someday. Just don't think you can strike me down and take my place. I wrote the book on great Game Mastering. Literally. You're holding it right now.

As a Game Master, you've probably realized that RPGs like *D&D* and *Pathfinder* aren't like other games. They aren't like board games. Not like video games. They're their own, unique thing. And you might even have realized that that's because of the freedom they offer players to do anything. And you should also have realized that RPGs can offer that freedom because of the human brain running the show. Your brain. The GM's brain.

But if you truly want to run the least worst game you can run, you have to understand the elements that really make an RPG unique. Sure, freedom is part of it. But not all of it. In fact, what you've been thinking of as freedom is part of something bigger. See, role-playing games actually have three hearts beating away inside their chests. Three core principles that make them what they are. And it's your job to keep them pumping. Because if they start to slow down or clog up, they will wreck your game. The players will start to resent your game. And then they'll resent you. Dice will get thrown. Torches and pitchforks will come out. And then things get really ugly.

To keep your game alive — and to keep yourself alive — you have to keep the three RPG hearts beating. The three hearts of agency, consistency, and engagement.

The Players as Free Agents

One of the most complex problems that philosophers and theologians have ever faced is how to reconcile humanity's apparent free-will with the deterministic nature of the universe, whether

that determinism arises from the immutable physical laws that drive the universe or from an infallible and all-knowing creator deity. Fortunately, we're not philosophers or theologians. We're just gamers. So, we only have to worry about the free-will of imaginary characters in pretend universes.

Agency is a narrative term. It refers to a character's power to affect the outcome of their story. Did you ever read the *Harry Potter* books? Did you ever notice how, in most of the books, Harry didn't really do much? Most of the important things were done by other characters? Hermione. Dumbledore. Sirius Lupin. John Coltrane. Harry didn't have much agency. Not until the last book. In fact, the last book is pretty much about Harry realizing he had no freaking clue how to be the hero of the story because Dumbledore and the other characters had been doing everything for him. And then Dumbledore got killed by Sirius Snape. But it's okay because Dumbledore told Snape to do it and Snape was a good guy all along because he loved Harry's mom. By the way, spoiler alert.

Anyway, the whole series is about Harry taking control of his own story. Of his own destiny. Well, that's agency. Now, books like *Harry Potter* — especially books written for children — can get away with wasting six entire books on waiting for the hero to actually do something for himself because they are books. But role-playing games can't. Because the players are the heroes of the story. And they need to feel like the things they are doing actually matter. The players' choices have to affect the outcome of the story.

As a GM, your job isn't to tell a specific story or to push the game along a certain path. Instead, your job is just to show the heroes where the path starts, give them a slap on the back, and tell them good luck. Then, you watch what they do and react to it. If they win, if they reach the end the path, great. If they lose, tough. That's how agency works. You offer goals, the players make choices, and you provide the outcomes and consequences. If the players do crazy, unexpected things — and they will, trust me — you have to figure out the result. You can't tell them what they can't do.

That doesn't mean you have to let them do the impossible. The heroes have to exist as real characters in an apparently real world. They can't walk through walls. And that doesn't mean you have to let them define the game. Or reject the game. If the heroes ignore the evil necromancer who's raising zombie pachyderms in the secret elephant burial ground, their hometown is going to get stomped and their families are going to be posthumously recruited into Necromancer Hannibal's evil army. You provide the world and the situation, the players make the choices, and everyone has to live with the consequences. Or die from them.

Now, GMs love to argue about agency and what agency means. Some GMs claim agency means total freedom over everything. If you — as the GM — so much as suggest a goal to the heroes, you're trampling over their freedom and ruining the game. And that's where terms like railroading come from. Railroading means, essentially, taking away all of the players' agency by telling them that they can only do what you've already decided they're going to do. Yes, that's a bad thing. But it's also something that almost never happens.

Smarter GMs — like me — understand that there are different levels of player agency and that most games provide a mix of the different types. They also understand that, while some players rebel if they don't have enough agency, other players can get paralyzed if you give them too much agency. So, each GM has to figure out the proper level of agency for each group.

Agency Level 1: The Freedom to Deal with the Situation

The lowest level of agency is the Freedom to Deal with the Situation. That's the agency that heroes have when they find themselves facing an obstacle or problem and they get to decide how to deal with it. It's the most common type of agency in most RPGs. Whenever you describe the current situation — like an ogre leaping out of a birthday cake swinging its club around — and then ask the players what they do, this is the freedom they have. And it's rare for a GM to squash it. The only way to take away that level of agency is to tell the players "no, you have to do this." If they run away, tell them "no, you can't run away; you have to fight." If they try to reason with the ogre, tell them "no, you can't reason with it; you have to fight."

Without the Freedom to Deal with the Situation, RPGs becoming boring, stupid video games where the players can only choose between a bunch of preprogrammed options. They can't be creative. They can't affect the outcome. They are basically just watching cut scenes and occasionally pressing buttons when prompted. It's like playing a *God of War* boss fight or any *Final Fantasy* game ever.

But that doesn't mean the players get to ignore the reality of the game world. This is a very fine point, but you have to understand it. It's one thing to say, "you can't run away; you have to fight." It's another to have the heroes locked in a room in Jabba's dungeon and then drop a Thangorian Snarl Beast in the room with them. Obviously, the heroes can't simply flee the Snarl Beast. But that's because of the situation, not because you're forbidding them from not fighting your Snarl Beast. And if they try to break open the door or pick the lock, maybe that will work.

The difference between robbing players of their agency and forcing them to deal with the reality of the game world comes down

to creating the situation and then reacting to what they do in the situation. It's not fair to suddenly tell the players that the heroes are locked in and they have to fight. But if they are in prison, they already know the situation. And if a door slams shut because they triggered a trap and locked them in with the Snarl Beast, well, that's the world reacting to their actions. And if the Snarl-Beast doesn't understand English and they try to talk, you don't say, "you can't talk to it; you have to fight," you say, "the creature doesn't seem to understand you at all; it's still advancing, what do you do?"

Now, that said, if too many traps lock the players in with unreasonable monsters, some players will start to cry foul. Even if you are merely creating situations and reacting to the players when they act, it can still seem like you're setting up situations that can only be dealt with one way. Agency is a tricky thing. It's a matter of trust. You reinforce it whenever the players are able to exercise their freedom and see you react to their actions. And you lose it every time you create situations that seem to force the players along one path.

But, in general, as long as the players can see the reality of the world around their characters and you react to their choices, the players will have the Freedom to Deal with the Situation.

Agency Level 2: The Freedom to Choose the Situation

The next level of agency is the Freedom to Choose the Situation. That's the agency the heroes have whenever the heroes are actually choosing their path through the adventure. And, by doing so, choosing which obstacles they face. When exploring a dungeon, the players can choose which rooms to explore. When they are traveling across country, they can choose which road to take. Or go off the road. They can choose who to talk to in town. They can decide whether to fight their way in the front or sneak around back.

Lots of RPG adventures offer this sort of freedom, too. Dungeon crawls are all about free exploration. Murder mysteries let the heroes decide which leads to follow and which subjects to talk to. Any adventure in which the players are picking a path and have multiple ways to reach their goal has this level of agency at its core.

If this sort of agency isn't built into the adventure you're running, you can add it in just by letting the players take alternate paths to their goal. For example, imagine the adventure you're running assumes the heroes will gain entry to the Evil Spikey Fortress of Doom by having an elaborate fight at the front gate. But the heroes want to scout around for another way in and bypass the spikey-armored minions guarding the front door. You check the map of the fortress and tell the players about a bunch of windows high up in the

castle walls. They decide to climb the outer wall. You improvise the way through the scene with your mad action adjudication skills. And they feel like masters of their own destiny.

This sort of agency really does make players feel like they have the freedom to choose their approach and direct their fate. While most players won't seek it out too often, if it's there whenever they go looking, they really will feel like the heroes of their own story. And, once again, it just comes down to presenting the world as it is and reacting to the players choices.

Agency Level 3: The Freedom to Choose the Goal

The top level of agency in RPGs is the Freedom to Choose the Goal. This is the agency the heroes are exercising whenever they decide what goals to pursue. Usually, you — as the GM — set the goal of the adventure. You assign the heroes a quest like rescuing a beautiful treasure or plundering an ancient princess. The heroes either encounter obstacles on the way and decide how to handle them — Agency Level 1 — or they figure out the best path to the goal and deal with the obstacles as they see fit — Agency Level 2. But at Agency Level 3, the heroes get to choose their own goals. They do whatever they want.

Think about video games like the *Elder Scrolls* and *Fallout* series. Mostly, those games consist of big, open maps. Yeah, there's a main quest, but the games don't get all worked up if you just ignore them. Your kidnapped baby and that undead dragon god fellow will wait for you to decide to deal with them. If you ever do. Meanwhile, you can just go anywhere and do anything. You can rob houses, explore dungeons, join the magic college, build a settlement, get married, whatever. Or you can just wander the countryside killing bears — or mutant bears — and collecting valuable treasures — or bottle caps.

In stupid RPG jargon, this is called sandbox play. There's just a big ole world to play in and you can do whatever you want in it. You can build sandcastles or dig for buried treasure or just sit in the corner moving piles of dirt around. And it provides a huge sense of agency, but it also has a couple of major downsides. First, it's hard to deal with. As a GM. You have to either build an entire world in advance and fill it with things to do or you have to be really good at making up entire adventures on the fly. Second, lots of players actually have a hard time dealing with the goallessness. Lots of gamers actually prefer the structure and direction that goals and quests provide. And if you let them do anything, they'll just do nothing.

Because of those problems, GMs who want to provide this level of Agency generally let the players choose between a few different

goals from a list. And they have the players pick the goal in advance, so they can plan the adventure accordingly. It's sort of a compromise, but it works. Because, the truth is, once the players have exercised their Level 3 Agency and picked the goal, the actual pursuit of that goal looks a lot like a Level 1 or 2 Agency game of finding paths and dealing with obstacles.

And, once again, preserving this level of agency just comes down to presenting the reality of the world and reacting to the players. Because that's what agency is all about.

A Consistent Illusion of Reality

Whatever level of agency your game provides — and it will probably provide different levels at different times — whatever level of agency you provide, your game is really all about the choices the heroes are making. And the outcomes and consequences of those choices. And just like in real life, we make choices based on what we think the outcomes will be.

If you were faced with a five-hundred-foot-tall cliff in the real world, you know that if you jumped off that cliff, you could expect to die in a little under two seconds after traveling five hundred feet and stopping very suddenly. That's because you understand things like the force of gravity and your inability to fly. And if your goals for the day did not include becoming one with the Earth in a very final way, you would probably decide not to jump off the cliff. Whenever you're faced with a situation, you consider your options, figure out which option will likely bring you closer to your goals, and choose that option.

In order to make good choices in role-playing games, the players have to be able to do the same thing. They have to be able to weigh their options and choose the ones that will most likely accomplish their goals. And if they can't do that, the players can only act randomly and hope things work out. That's not making choices. That's just rolling dice.

That's why RPGs have rules to stand in for the laws of physics and the other properties of the universe. I may not know anything about dragons and magical lightning bolts, but the rules define saving throws and attack rolls and damage rolls so that I can assess what is likely to happen when a dragon meets a magical lightning bolt. And RPGs use dice because, just like in real life, no one has the perfect knowledge needed to predict the precise outcome of every choice.

You might be a great mountain climber, but there's still a chance you'll misjudge a climb and fall. The tougher the climb, the higher the risk. The rules of the game and the dice model that unpredictability. And they model it in such a way that no one playing the game has to be an expert mountain climber to play one in the game. The skill

modifier on the character sheet reflects the character's knowledge of their own skill level. The DC reflects the difficulty of the climb. The die represents errors in judgement, freak accidents, and the perversity of the universe.

But the rules aren't perfect. They can't simulate reality completely. They'd have to be infinitely long to do that. And it takes a long time to read an infinitely long rulebook. Not that it matters how long it takes to read; you won't remember it all anyway. That's where the GM comes in. The GM has to answer all the questions the rules don't answer. Like what happens when a wizard hurls a fireball spell at an underwater target? Or can you lasso a flying creature and pull it out of the air? Or do dwarven women have beards? Or do female dragon-people have breasts? I wish I was making up those last two. Gamers have issues.

As a GM, you have to make all of those calls. But every time you make a call, you're teaching the players something about the world. If a fireball spell explodes against the surface of the water and doesn't hurt the demonic sharktopus swimming below, the players have learned that fireball spells are useless against underwater foes. They won't try that trick again. And they probably won't try other forms of fire magic against underwater foes either. But if the fireball boils its way right into the water and turns the sharktopus into evil calamari fillet, they'll remember the strategy and use it again.

See where this is going? The players have to know the rules of the world to make good choices. And you're constantly teaching them new rules about the world every time you make a judgement call. You have to be consistent. You can't flip flop. Once you decide the world works a certain way, it has to keep working that way. And, because players will be guessing how things will work out based on their own logic to begin with, your calls have to be logical from the start. Otherwise, you're literally ruining the game.

Thing is, though, the actual call you make rarely matters. It doesn't matter whether fireballs work underwater or not. I know a thousand screaming GMs on the Internet will tell you differently. GMs love to scream and rant about how things should work and which ways are the best, the most realistic, or the most fair. But it's just pointless yelling. The answer doesn't matter. What matters is that your world makes sense and follows consistent rules so that the players can always guess how things are going to work. And then they can make good choices and come up with clever plans and crazy capers.

The point is: don't be afraid to make whatever judgement calls you have to make. Make them however you want. Just be consistent. It's more important to be consistent than it is to be right.

An Engagement with Your Players

Let's talk about fun. Fun is a stupid, terrible word that a lot of GMs like to throw around. They say stupid things like "as long as everyone is having fun, you're running a good game" or "your job is to make sure everyone is having fun." That's terrible advice. Partly because it doesn't tell you how to actually do anything. How do you make people have fun anyway? But mostly, it's terrible advice because games aren't always fun and they shouldn't always be.

Imagine you're playing a game like *Dark Souls*. And you actually like that kind of thing. You're fighting Ornstein and Smough. They've killed you a hundred times already, but this time is different. You've already killed off Ornstein. Smough is almost dead. Problem is, you've got one tiny little sliver of health left and no healing *estus* to drink. Smough is stomping and charging around. You dodge-roll. He swings. You dodge again. He stomps. You make six perfectly timed dodges in a row. And you manage to get behind him. You land your last attack. And he's dead. You won!

Now, that's not the sort of thing you'd describe as fun. It was tense as hell. You were probably trying to keep your hands from shaking. You're probably hyperventilating too. You might need to take a break for a moment. Calm down. Yeah, that's not fun. But you were invested. You cared about the outcome. It was all you cared about. Your house could have been burning down around you and you wouldn't have even noticed.

That's engagement. Engagement happens when you're engrossed in the game your playing. You're emotionally invested. You're feeling something. And you can't tear yourself away. It might be fun, sure, but it might also be tension or fear or sadness or excitement or joy. The actual emotion doesn't matter. The fact that you're having any emotions at all is the important part.

As a GM, your job is to keep the players engaged with the game. You want them interested in the outcome. You want them caring about the game. And you want you caring about the game too. Because, if you're not emotionally invested in the game you're running, you're not going to run a great game. The problem is, you can't just wave a magic wand and make people feel emotions. The only thing you can do is make a game that will cause people to feel emotions. And that means understanding why people play games at all.

Different people play games for different reasons. Some people play games because they like a challenge. They like to win. Some people play games for the stories and the characters. They like to get emotionally involved in the lives of people they care about. Some people play games because they want to spend time with their

friends. They don't care what the game is as long as they are doing it with other people.

How do you create and maintain engagement? Well, that's tricky. Every player has a different mental itch that they are looking to scratch with role-playing games. And to scratch those itches, you have to first know what those itches are. And it seems like there should be as many itches as there are people, right?

Nope.

It turns out there's only eight major itches people use games to scratch. More or less. And a group of game design academics figured out the list back in 2001 as part of a game design system called The MDA Design Approach. They wrote a paper about it. It's actually a pretty interesting read. And it's become pretty much an accepted part of the academic study of video game design over the last decade and a half. In short, it works.

So, what are the eight mental itches — which they call engagements — that games can scratch? Glad you asked.

Challenge

People who like challenge want to compete. They want a game they can win. Or lose. And they want it to be fair. Players who really get into action scenes and who care how powerful their characters are usually like a challenge. As does any player who wants to win the adventure at any cost.

Discovery

People who like discovery want to explore the game and the world the game takes place in. They want to uncover all the secrets, explore every room, understand every system, and find every hidden treasure. Players who leave no stone unturned, who ask a lot of questions, and insist on visiting every room in the dungeon are in it for discovery.

Expression

Players who want to express themselves want to show off their creative side. They like to create things that are unique to them and share them with others. Players who get really into character creation are probably expression lovers. Especially if they like playing unique and unusual characters and writing elaborate backstories for them. If they focus on showing off their creative side, they are after expression.

Fantasy

Fantasy lovers want to escape into another world. They want to be their characters and lose themselves in the imaginary world. Players

who spend a lot of time interacting with the other characters in the world and like to play out the day-to-day routines in their character's lives are likely fantasy seekers. Especially if they want to act out every shopping trip.

Fellowship

Fellowship is engagement you feel when you're doing something with other people. Players who like fellowship are happy just being part of a group. In fact, they often seem like they aren't engaged with the game at all. That's because they are just there to hang with their friends.

Narrative

Narrative seekers love a good story. It's not about being part of the story, though. It's about the story itself. All the stuff that makes a movie good — well-written characters, understandable motivations, a solid beginning, an exciting climax, and a strong ending — that's what they want in their game.

Sense Pleasure

Sense pleasure is the pleasure people get from seeing, hearing, and touching cool stuff. Art, miniature figures, maps, stuff like that. You know the people who get really into the graphics and music in video games? They are after sense pleasure. Admittedly, sense pleasure doesn't play a big role in RPGs, but, between the art and the maps and the figures and the dice, there is some. But, likely, players who are most interested in sense pleasure are watching movies or playing video games, not exploring your imaginary world.

Submission

People who like submission like to lose themselves in mindless, repetitive things. They just want to shut their brains off for a little while and relax. They are drawn to simple quests and dungeon crawls with lots of low-power mooks to mow down and lots of treasure to pile up.

Being an Engaging Host

Now that you understand why people play games, you can tailor your game to your particular players. How? Well, first you have to figure out what your players want out of your game. And that means watching your players. What seems to get them most excited? What parts of the game do they really sit up and pay attention to? And what game activities do they spend the most time on? This is kind of like a logic puzzle. Is the player who just goes with the flow more into Submission or Fellowship? Does the player who spends

all their time talking to NPCs care more about Discovery, Fantasy, or Narrative? There's no simple test you can give your players. Don't try. Trust me. People don't know themselves very well and you are better off trusting what they do than what they say. You just have to be observant.

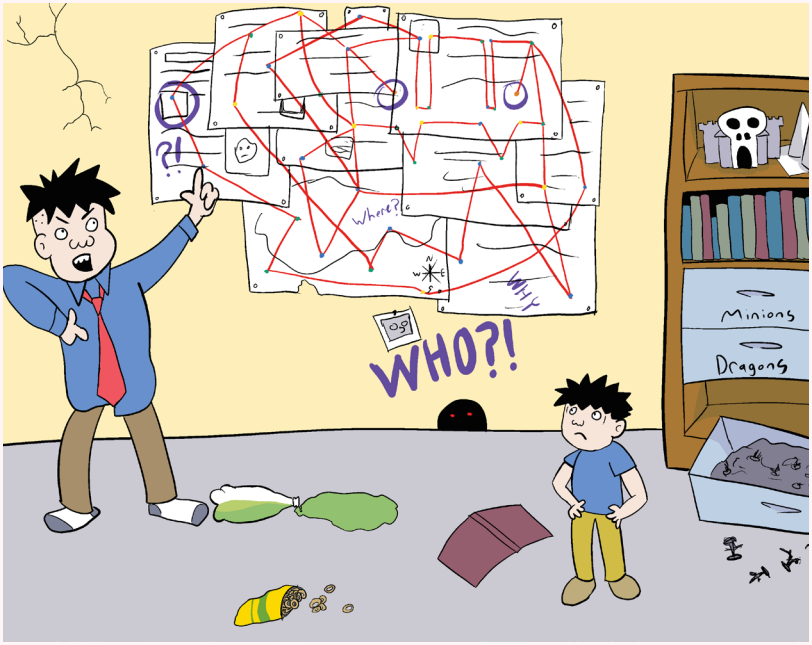
Keep a list of the engagements that come up at your table. Once you've got a solid list, create game situations that play into those engagements and see if the players respond. Some situations are easier than others. Submission seekers like straightforward adventures and easy fights. Challenge seekers like difficult fights and complex challenges. Fantasy seekers care more about being in the world. Discovery seekers want to understand the world. Narrative seekers want to understand the story. There's no science to this. You just have to feel it out. But it'll help you tailor your experience to your players. And yourself.

Yeah, you have to be engaged too. You run the game for reasons. Do you like creating a unique world or creating a functioning world. That'll tell you whether you care more about Expression or Fantasy. Do you love running tough combats? You might be a Challenge seeker yourself who has just learned to deal with the fact that you're never allowed to win. Doesn't stop you from trying.

As you get to know your players engagements and your own, you'll be able to build a game that everyone can engage with. Not just one people can have fun with.

Chapter 9:

How it All Fits Together



When you get down to it, a role-playing game is just a series of situations, action resolutions, and transitions. At least, that's probably how it seems. Set the scene, invite the players to act, resolve the action, describe the outcome, and so on. But you've probably already noticed there's more to it than that. For one thing, you have to periodically transition between scenes. For another, an ongoing game is broken up into sessions and adventures. The truth is, there's a structure to role-playing games beyond the basic loop of describing scenes and resolving actions.

In truth, a role-playing game fits together like a bunch of those creepy Russian egg-shaped dolls that live inside each other. You know the ones I mean. They all look eerily similar to each other, with inhuman faces devoid of expression or feeling, each one smaller than the last. Each one gestating inside another like those aliens from that movie that kills all the people on the spaceship after they find that dead alien and those alien eggs on that alien planet. Whatever it was called.

Sorry. I got sidetracked.

Terrible metaphors aside, a role-playing game might look like nothing more than a sequence of scenes and actions played out over several hours and numerous sessions. But there's a more complex, nested structure to the whole thing. And if you understand that structure, you can use your understanding to run better games.

The Episodes that Aren't

Ongoing role-playing games are played out in sessions. A session is just a chunk of time during which people play role-playing games. The five hours you spent last Saturday running your players through the Forbidden Pyramid of Ixlilixlithl? That was a session. And, next Saturday, when you pick up where you left off in the Chamber of the Monkey Mandrill? That will be another session.

Sessions happen because you can't spend your whole life playing RPGs. You have to eat and sleep and go to work and go to school and do basic hygiene things. Please do basic hygiene things. Gamers have a bad reputation when it comes to basic hygiene things and too many gamers keep reinforcing that reputation.

The point is, you can't spend all of your time playing RPGs. You also have to do all the human things you have to do to stay alive and be a marginally productive member of society. Which means you have to break up your ongoing game into sessions.

Sessions have nothing to do with the structure of the game. They are just the real-world intruding on your desire to play RPGs all the time. And most GMs handle sessions as if they have nothing to do with the game. When the session ends, they just put the game on pause. When everyone gets together again next week, they unpause the game and keep going. And that's fine. Mostly. Partly. Well, actually, it does cause some problems.

Previously…

Unfortunately, even though the heroes remain frozen in time between sessions and can pick up the action right where they left off, they don't get to pause their brains. That's because the heroes' brains are inside the players' heads. And that means the heroes' brains have to spend the time in between sessions doing non-adventure things in a completely different world. Eating, sleeping, working, basic hygiene things, etc. By the time those brains are back in the heroes' heads, they aren't always in the right frame of mind to fight off that cursed, mummified mandrill. And they might have forgotten the exact details of those hieroglyphs they found in the Vault of Mysterious and Vaguely Helpful Clues. The ones warning them that the mandrill mummy's chamber is filled with explosive gas which means the standard tactic of setting mummified monsters

on fire will go catastrophically wrong for everyone who can't reach the exit before the end of the round. And they'll certainly have forgotten that poem that tells them exactly which buttons to press to deactivate the trap in the Room that Fills Up with Sand and Also with Death Scorpions. A lot of details can get lost in a week.

But that's not all.

You Know What That Sound Means: We're Out of Time

A good RPG plays like a good movie. It builds to stuff. If you spent the entire session building up the surprise encounter with the mummy mandrill and then ran out of time just after the mummy mandrill clawed its way out of the casket, you've lost the impact of that climax. Or worse. Imagine stopping the action in the middle of a fight. Dramatic tension — which we'll talk about in a later chapter — builds through the course of a fight. And then it gets released when the fight ends. If you stop a fight in the middle, you can't just jump back in later and expect the same level of excitement.

Even if you could, stopping in the middle of a complex combat is just a pain. Everyone is spread out all over the battlefield. The monsters have taken some damage. Maybe one of the players has been cursed with mummy monkey malaise. There's just a lot to keep track of in any fight. And ending the session in the middle of the fight means writing all that stuff down so you can properly set up the fight next time. It's like trying to record how many armies are in each territory in *Risk* because you've got no place to keep the board set up and the game is taking forever and everyone wants to go to bed but you're sure as hell not forfeiting the game because you're winning.

The point is, breaking a game into sessions can really ruin the pace and flow of the game, it can lead to confusion, and it's just a pain in the butt.

A Well-Structured Session

All of that is why smart GMs don't simply treat the breaks between sessions as pauses in the game. And you don't want to be one of those other GMs. Be smart, structure your game around sessions.

For example, start each session with a recap. Review the highlights of what happened in previous sessions. You don't have to cover every moment of the last game. Just remind the players what was happening, what their goals were, what important bits of information and treasure they discovered, what important characters they met, and so on. Don't ask the players to do the recap. I know some GMs love to do that. But those are the other kind of GM. Doing the recap yourself means you can make sure the players don't

forget anything important. And if they think the wrong things are important, you can fix that by not bringing them up.

But don't just launch into a recap the minute you all sit down at the table. Players are obnoxiously social creatures. They need friends. Not like you. You're a loner. That's why you're a GM. The thing is, the players probably haven't seen each other in over a week. And they've got a lot of social interaction drivel to spew at each other. If you don't let them get it all out, they'll be babbling through the entire session instead of focusing on killing mummy mandrills and evading death scorpions. Let the players chat for a while at the start of each session. Fifteen minutes is usually enough. You can even join in if you must. Once the allotted time is over — or the conversation starts to peter out — call everyone to attention. Then, take care of any managey administrativey things you have to do. Discuss the schedule, review the rules, make sure everyone has leveled up their character. The key is to gradually wade into the game. To switch those player brains into game mode so they can take control of the heroes. After the administrative crap, do the recap, set the scene, and start the game.

Eventually, the session will approach its allotted end time. And you should always have a specific end time in mind. When you're within about a half hour of that end time, start looking for a good spot to end the session. Something that will make the players feel disappointed that the session is over. Always leave them wanting more. Make them feel like they have to come back. In the business, we call such a point a cliffhanger. That's because of those old serial adventure movies that would end each week's episode with the hero literally dangling from the edge of a cliff. "How will Montana Smith get out of this? Come back next week to find out."

You don't want to do anything that drastic. Mainly because you don't want to end your game in the middle of a scene. But you can end your session right at the start of an exciting scene. As long as it's not the last scene of the adventure. Never start a session with a climax or a boss fight. Because you want a chance to build up some excitement before the climax. If you can't find a good, exciting spot that isn't too exciting, look for a natural break in the action. If the heroes retreat to their camp to rest for the night, that's a perfect place to end the session.

Once you've hit the end point for your session, you don't just want to kick the players out for the night. This also has to do with dramatic pacing and tension, which we'll cover in more detail in **Chapter 12**. You want to gradually ease the players back out of the game after you stop the action. This is a great time to do some bookkeepey gamey crap like handing out experience points or dividing up the treasure. By bleeding off the excitement of the game,

you're providing something called a dénouement, which is basically liberal-arts-speak for the reason why a movie doesn't end the minute the villain is dead. Your brain needs a falling action to properly enjoy a good story. Even an incomplete one.

Letting the Sessions Plan the Game

Session management can be a huge pain in the hindquarters. So, lots of GMs — smart ones — actually use the session structure to plan their games. If you're really good at time management, it's not a bad way to handle things at all. Basically, you just make sure that the end of every session lines up with the accomplishment of a major goal. Or the end of an adventure. Or you can just force the issue. If your ongoing game involves the heroes making repeated expeditions into the Lost Undervaults of Grayfalcon Mountain, you can just end each session with the heroes returning to town to rest, recover, and level up. "Whoops, time is up. You head back to the entrance and return to town. Good run, guys. Let's divvy the loot."

But, that doesn't work for every game and every GM. Building each session around a good routine does, though. Just do that.

The Nesting Dolls of RPGs: Action, Scene, Adventure, Campaign

The whole session thing comes from the real-world intruding on your games. But there is also an actual structure to the game itself. One that comes from the way the game works. Remember that Russian nesting doll thing? Well, an ongoing game is structured like that. The whole game fits together like a bunch of egg-shaped porcelain monstrosities shoved inside each other.

Actions: The Smallest Unit of Role-Playing Game

A role-playing game is a series of actions. The heroes find themselves in some crazy situation. You describe it. One of the heroes decides to do something stupid about it. You adjudicate the action and describe the result. That creates a new situation and round you go. Ultimately, that's the smallest chunk of an RPG that counts as an RPG. Situation, choice, action, resolution. That whole cycle is called an action.

Actions seem like momentary things. But they aren't. Actions have nothing to do with the passage of time in the game world. Actions are entirely defined by that situation-choice-resolution cycle, no matter how much time would pass on screen if the game were a movie. If the heroes spend all day in the library researching ghouls because they suspect such information might be useful for their planned attack on the Terrible Ghoul King of Ghoulopolis, an entire

day might pass in game. But that's still just one action. Actions are defined by the choice to act and the resolution of the act itself.

But a game is also more than just a series of actions. Sometimes there's jumps between the actions. Time passes. Or the heroes move from place to place, to different rooms in the dungeon or different places in the city. Obviously, there's more to the structure of the game than just a series of actions.

Setting the Scene for Action

Actions don't happen unprovoked. Players don't just do things without any rhyme or reason. I mean, it might seem that way. Players can make some very "interesting" choices. But they do have reasons. Even if those reasons only make sense to them.

See, players act in the pursuit of goals. The heroes are trying to accomplish something. The players decide what actions are likely to get the heroes what they want. They want information about ghouls, so they go to the library and do some research. Or the heroes want to get through the heavily guarded gates of Ghoulopolis, so they attack. Or they desperately need time to nurse their friends back to health, so they drag them into a hidden alley and hide from the ghoul patrol.

That's why actions take place within scenes. The scenes give the actions some context. Some purpose. There's a heavily guarded gate and the heroes want to get through that gate. That's why they attack. Scenes are basically containers where you can stuff all the actions in a game.

A scene is a chunk of the story that takes place in a certain location over a certain period of time during which something specific is happening. But, like actions, scenes can be pretty spread out. A chase scene might take place across all of the streets of St. Petersburg, Russia. A training scene might take place over the course of several weeks in the swamps of Planet Dagobah. The important bit — the bit that defines the scene — is that something specific is happening to tie the scene together. The heroes are chasing the villains in a tank. Or they're learning how to use magic from Kermit the Space Frog. Whatever.

As long as the heroes keep pursuing their goals, whatever those are, the scene continues. They keep taking actions and you keep resolving them. Once the heroes accomplish whatever they are trying to accomplish, or they fail, or they give up and wander away, or their goal suddenly changes, the scene ends. And that's your signal to narrate a transition. That transition might represent a change in location or the passage of time. "Having successfully completed your training, you bid Kermit farewell and climb back into the Enterprise to fly to Planet Maranda. Several days pass in hyperspace before

you land at Torchwood Base." Or it might simply signal a switch from pursuit — one goal — to another. "The villain's car has crashed. The villain staggers from the wreck and puts his hands up, surrendering. You climb out of the tank and can start pumping him for information."

So, the game plays out as a series of scenes. During each scene, the heroes take actions and you resolve them until the scene is done. Then you move the action to a new scene. And that's the basic structure of a role-playing game.

By the way, an encounter is a special type of scene in which there's actually some kind of conflict. And the concept of encounters is so important they deserve their own chapter. We'll be revisiting encounters in **Chapter 11**.

Going on an Adventure

Scenes are defined by immediate goals. Short-term goals. Something that has to be done now. Capture the villain, train with the Muppet, escape the ghouls, whatever. But an RPG is more than just a string of problems to solve and goals to pursue. All of those short-term goals, all of those obstacles, they are usually sitting between the heroes and some larger goal.

The heroes aren't just plundering the Lost Undervaults of Grayfalcon Mountain one room at a time. They are trying to find all of the hidden treasure in the dungeon. Or kill every last thing in the dungeon. They aren't just chasing down the villain for fun. They are trying to tie him to the murder of Malten Falcone and put him away for life. It doesn't matter whether the scenes are rooms in a dungeons or chases and searches and interrogations. The scenes exist as part of a larger pursuit.

This is where the whole nesting doll thing becomes totally obvious. I hope. Adventures are the containers for scenes. They give context to the scenes. Reasons for the scenes to exist. Just like the scenes provide reasons for the actions. They provide goals. And an RPG game is just a bunch of goals within goals within goals.

When the heroes take on an adventure, they accept a goal. They move from scene to scene, on a path toward that goal. Along the way, each scene presents them with a more immediate goal. Something they have to do to keep moving forward. And to deal with the scene, they have to pick individual actions that will get them through the scene. Then they move on to the next scene. And on and on. Eventually, they get to the final scene. The one in which they finally accomplish the big goal. They find the murderer, rescue the prince, kill the last monster in the Grayfalcon Mountains, whatever. And then it's time for a new adventure. A new big goal.

And while you can build a whole, long, ongoing game as a string of interconnected adventures, you can actually put more

creepy Russian dolls around the adventures too. Which shouldn't be surprising at this point.

On the Campaign Trail

Lots of games do just fine as a string of disjointed adventures. The heroes kill the monsters one week, save the murderer next week, and bring the prince to justice the week after. The only thing that ties the adventures together is the fact that its mostly the same players playing mostly the same heroes. Mostly. Because heroes do sometimes die and get replaced. And players sometimes leave the game. And sometimes, new players join the game in progress. And that's what a campaign is. A campaign is just a string of adventures in which mostly the same players play mostly the same heroes.

But the adventures don't have to be completely disjointed. A campaign can provide context like another Russian nesting doll. For example, the heroes might be fighting an evil empire for control of the galaxy, just to choose one hackneyed, boring cliché. Individual adventures might feature the heroes rescuing imprisoned diplomats, recovering important intelligence, destroying powerful super weapons, protecting rebel strongholds from attack, and so on. And each of those adventures will be made up of scenes. Like the scene where the heroes sneak into the control room disguised as imperial soldiers or the scene where they escape from the prison block into the sewers. And, during each of those scenes, they will be taking actions to accomplish all that sneaking and escaping.

Even if a campaign doesn't have a stated goal — like fighting the evil empire — many campaigns end up with long-term, overarching, implied goals. The heroes might tackle any adventure they are paid to. That implies the heroes are just in it for the money. Or the heroes might be wandering the world fighting various evils because they are the good guys and that's what good guys do. Or maybe each hero has their own reason to adventure. One hero wants to ransom her father from prison, for example, while another wants to reclaim his family's ancestral kingdom. How each adventure helps them get closer to their goals is up to you — and your players — to work out.

Truth be told, if you're going to play an ongoing game — a campaign — having a long-term goal can help make the adventures feel like part of the same grand story instead of just a bunch of random episodes. It isn't necessary, but it's nice to have.

And while I'm on the subject, let me mention adventure paths. These are a fairly new thing in the RPG sphere and they blur the line between an adventure and a campaign. Basically, an adventure path is a series of adventures that form a multi-part super adventure. Paizo — the folks behind *Pathfinder* — basically invented the format back when they were still publishing material for *Dungeons &*

Dragons. The first one was a series of adventures that appeared in *Dungeon* magazine called *The Shackled City*. It was pretty good. Then, Paizo perfected the format for *Pathfinder* when they published the six-part adventure path *Rise of the Runelords*. Wizards of the Coast's own published modules these days — like *Curse of Strahd* and *Storm King's Thunder* — are more like adventure paths disguised as big honking adventure modules. But they aren't structured nearly as well in my correct opinion. Your mileage may vary, though.

But if campaigns or adventure paths aren't your thing, there is a way to completely eschew any sort of ongoing structure at all.

The One and Done Adventure

Instead of playing a string of loosely connected adventures as a campaign or a big, multi-part adventure path, you can totally give up on the idea of ongoing games altogether. Basically, you can run a game that consists of a single adventure. Just one and done. Then, story over. Heroes retired. The end. That's called a one-shot adventure.

Why would you ever want to do that? Well, there's a few reasons. You might be running an adventure at a gaming convention with a random group of strangers. Once the adventure is over, you'll never see those players again. Or you might be playing or running your first game ever and following the instructions I laid out in **Chapter 4** of this book. Or you and your friends might be learning a new game system for the first time. It's a lot easier to learn a new system with a one-shot adventure and it gives you the chance to make sure you like the game before you commit to a longer campaign. Or you might be running a tournament or an official event at a local game store. Or a bunch of your players didn't show up for your regular game session and you want to run a one-off game for the people who did show up. I know of one group that decided to play a different RPG system every month for a year, just to try a whole bunch of games. They basically ran a one-shot adventure every month with a different system.

Oh, by the way, note that a one-shot adventure is an adventure that won't ever have a follow up adventure. It's one and done. Fire and forget. But that doesn't mean the whole adventure has to fit into a single session. Lots of them do. Convention one-shots, tournaments, official events, and pick-up games are usually one-shot games that are meant to be completed in a single session. But a one-shot adventure can span two or three or even more sessions. The group that ran a new system every month? They basically spent three sessions playing out each one-shot adventure. So, the adventures themselves were about twelve hours long.

The Goal of All of This

So, RPGs are like nesting dolls. Players take actions within scenes. Scenes add up to adventures. And adventures take place in campaigns. Unless they are one-shot adventures. So, what? What is the point of explaining all this?

Well, there are two points. And I don't like being questioned, hypothetical reader. Watch your attitude.

The first point is to set up the next few chapters of this book. **Chapter 10** is all about adjudicating actions properly. **Chapter 11** is about setting up scenes and encounters. **Chapter 12** is about running scenes that involve non-player characters. And **Chapters 13** and **14** are all about how scenes and adventures work to tell a good story as well as being a fun game. See how it all fits together? Just goes to show that I know a thing or two about nested structures.

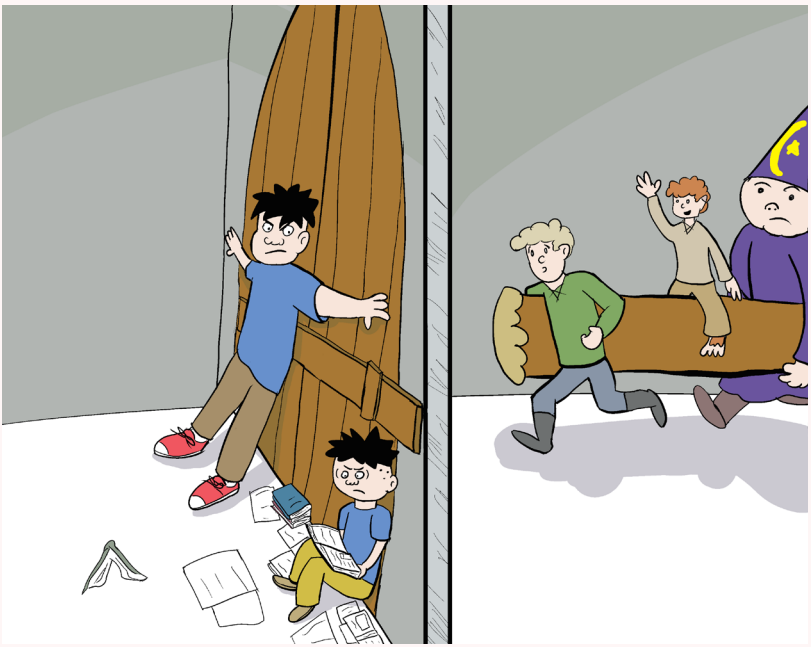
The other point is that it's important to have a point. Each nesting doll in the structure provides a point for the previous doll. The structure is about goals within goals. Games need goals. Otherwise, the players don't know what to do. Imagine trying to play basketball without knowing the point is to kick the ball into the opponent's home base. Someone passes you the ball and you… what? What do you do? You don't know because you don't know what the goal of the game is.

Campaigns provide the longest of long-term goals. Someday, the heroes will be rich. Someday, they will save the world from the Ghoul King. Someday, they will defeat the evil empire. Adventures provide medium-term goals that get the heroes closer to the long-term goals. The heroes will liberate Ghoulopolis from the Ghoul King, weakening his power. The heroes will destroy the Imperial weapon. Because if they do that twice and kill the emperor, by the rules of the galaxy, they win. Scenes provide immediate goals that let the heroes pursue their medium-term goals. They will enter Ghoulopolis, they will sneak through the streets, they will kill Goulash the Ghoulish Governor. And in each scene, they take actions to accomplish the short-term goals of the scene. They will attack Goulash, they will cast a fireball spell at him, and so on.

For the game to work, the heroes have to know what their goals are. They have to know what the goal of the adventure is and what the goal of the scene is and how that fits into the adventure. And they should be able to say how the adventure fits into their long-term goals. The players have to understand what the heroes are trying to do so they know which way to kick the basketball. Fortunately, goals are such an integral part of the game that the game literally can't fit together without them.

Chapter 10:

Advanced Action Adjudication



Forget everything you know about action adjudication. You know, the basic skill of figuring out what happens when the heroes actually do stuff in the story. Because I can almost guarantee you're doing it wrong. Or at least, you're not doing it right enough. Even if you're following my instructions from **Chapter 5**. Yeah, sorry. That was only part of the story.

Now, you've probably been doing okay. You can probably handle it when one of your mixed nuts says something like, "Gax't the Goblin Warlock will scratch out the magical exploding rune with that old femur we found in the dungeon. That should disarm it. It's just a symbol chalked into the wall." You probably know enough to hide your snicker as you say, "okay, you can try." But knowing how to determine and describe the outcomes of player actions is just the tip of the massive iceberg that's imprisoning Klaax the Malign, Frost Dragon Lich of Frostmarrow Pass. Because an RPG is more than just a string of actions. As explained in **Chapter 9**, those actions have a

goal. They have a purpose. And that means those actions have — or should have — far-reaching consequences.

Players interact with the game by taking actions. So, action adjudication is the thing that eats up most of your time. Thus, it's important to do it well. And if you know what you're doing, it's not hard to do it well. But if you're even a little confused, it's easy to do it wrong. Really wrong. So, in this chapter, I'm going to explain the whole process of action adjudication. Beginning to end. Soup to mixed nuts. Even the parts I already explained. But there's going to be a lot of new stuff. This is *advanced* action adjudication, after all.

Dice Suck

You might think dice are pretty cool. They come in lots of fun colors and shapes, they feel nice in your hands, they make a satisfying noise when they rub together in a fancy, felt dice bag — unless you're one of those losers who just shoves their dice in a discarded Crown Royal bag — and they add a lot of excitement to the game. But dice suck. Sorry.

An RPG isn't just a fun, exciting game. It's also an interesting fantasy adventure story. Starring you. Imagine you're really into the game. Into what's happening. Things are going badly but you have a plan that's just crazy enough to work. Juniper takes out the can of whipped cream. Shawn Salmonbane starts chanting the *summon rubber ducky* spell. Klaax the Undead Frost Dragon is coming around, getting ready to make another diving pass, and… STOP! Okay, grab the die. Not that die, the other die. Check your modifier. Don't forget the enhancement bonus on the enchanted shaving cream. But you only get half the modifier because you don't have a hot lather machine. Oh, and Shawn gets a bonus because Klaax has a latex allergy. No. Wait. Klaax is undead. The undead are immune to effects with the anaphylaxis keyword. Well, that's still a +6. Now, wait. The GM has to figure out the DC. Carry the 2. Adjust for the wind. Okay, now you can roll the die. Not that die. The other die.

I'm not saying die rolls don't make the game more exciting. They do. The moment when the die hits the table and you wait for it to settle down is one of those moments when you're holding your breath. Waiting. The tension is palpable. It's worth all the math and rules and statistics even. But every die roll is also a speedbump. It slows down the game. And it pulls you out of the story. It reminds you that this isn't really an exciting adventure after all. It's just a game about pretend elves that involves a lot of math and paperwork.

The die roll has to be worth the action. That's the point. The rubber-ducky-and-hot-lather dracolich situation? That's probably worth a die roll. But what about when the heroes ask some schlub

on the street for directions to the local tavern. That's just not on the same level.

Your job as a GM is to use the dice as little as possible. Use them only when things really matter. That way, the dice will remain a source of tension and excitement and all that math won't bog down the game and ruin the story.

The Rules Are Tools

The rules of the game — and those include the dice — the rules are your tools. You use them to adjudicate actions. When you need them. Beyond that, the rules don't exist. Not for you and not for your players. Lots of GMs — and lots of players — have this habit of referring to the rules as if they are playing a game. Like the heroes might be trying to talk their way past a guard into a restricted area and one of the players says something stupid like, "can Thaldor roll a Diplomacy check to get past the guard."

No. NO! Bad player! Bad!

There's no such thing as a Diplomacy check. Not in the game world. A Diplomacy check is just a rule. It's a tool. It's used to figure out what happens when a hero tries to use persuasion to get another character to do what they want. And when there's a chance that persuasion might not work. But it's not the persuasion itself.

The players shouldn't be referring to the rules. Their job is to describe their heroes' actions. And if they do refer to the rules, stop them. Demand they tell you what the hero is actually doing. Is Thaldor begging? Pleading? Crying? Offering a bribe? You can't adjudicate an action unless you know what the action is. And you can't use the rules until after you start adjudicating the action. The rules can't come first.

Angry's Axioms for Action Adjudication

The two preceding ideas — that the dice suck and the rules are tools for the GM to use — those two ideas add up to a set of rules that you should follow every time you have to adjudicate an action. I call them Angry's Axioms for Awesome Action Adjudication. When a player describes the action their hero is taking — or attempting to take — follow these laws to figure out how to resolve the action. Otherwise, you're wrong. And why would you want to be wrong?

The Player Must Declare an Action

When a player tells you what their hero is doing in response to a situation, that's called "declaring an action." Basically, the player is describing the action they want their fictional hero to take in the game world. Like, if the game were a movie, the player is telling you what you'd see the hero doing on screen. Because the rules don't

exist, players can't refer to the rules when declaring an action. The rules don't exist in the game world. There's no character sheets and skill modifiers in the movie. If the player doesn't declare an action, stop them and tell them to try again. I like to use sarcasm. "Sure, you can roll a Stealth check. And after you're done pointlessly rolling dice, you can tell me what your hero is actually doing. Oh? You're trying to hide from the guard patrol? Why didn't you just say that? I thought you just wanted to test out your dice."

An Action Must Have an Intent and Approach

Just because a player manages to declare an action doesn't mean they've declared a good, useful action. They get it wrong. A lot. Usually by leaving out critical information. See, in order to adjudicate an action, you have to know what the hero is trying to accomplish and how the hero is trying to accomplish it.

That Diplomacy check thing with the guard? Thaldor wants to persuade the guard to let the party into the restricted area? That's nice. But how? Is Thaldor just saying please? Or is there a good argument being made? Does Thaldor have some leverage? This is important. Most guards don't let people walk into restricted areas just because they say please. A guard's sole purpose — their *raisin to exister*, as the French say — is to guard stuff. If they can be bypassed with a single, polite word, they aren't worth their salary.

What the hero's trying to accomplish? That's called the **intent**. Get past the guard. Open the door. Hide from Klaax the Malign. And how they're trying to accomplish it? That's called the **approach**. By being really friendly. By picking the lock. By taking cover under the pile of dead allies and pretending to be a corpse. Got it?

Now, players don't have to be super detailed. Some players like to speak in character. They will launch into an actual speech that'd earn them an Academy Award if they weren't wasting their talents on a game about pretend elves in a basement somewhere. Others just give brief descriptions. "Thaldor is being really seductive and charming and promises to meet the guard after his shift is over at the local tavern for a drink."

As long as you can identify what the player is trying to do and how they are trying to do it, you've got a good action declaration on your hands. And if you can't figure out the what and how, ask. Ask the player, "what are you actually trying to do? Okay. How are you trying to make that happen?" Because you can't adjudicate an action without an intent and an approach.

Can the Player Succeed? Can They Fail? Is There a Risk?

Now it's time to figure out which tool to use to resolve the action. And the first tool you use is always your brain. It might be the only tool you need. You might not need dice at all. Which is good. Because dice suck.

First, decide if the player's approach can actually lead to the outcome they want. Is success possible? For example, if the guard is in a faithful, committed relationship or if he's a member of a weird purity cult like the Disney Kid's Club or if he's not straight or not gay or not into orcs or whatever, it might not be possible for Thaldor to seduce him. That happens. If success is impossible, the action fails.

Second, decide if there's any way the player's approach could *not* lead to the outcome they want. Is failure possible. If the guard is desperately lonely and of the proper sexual persuasion and is underpaid and he quit his job and today is his last day, it might be unimaginable for the guard to refuse Thaldor's advances. If failure is impossible, the action succeeds. No die roll needed.

It's important when you're doing this to be reasonable and practical. And not nitpick over very small probability outcomes. Yes, it is possible to choke and die every time you take a swig of water from your canteen. If the odds of failing at something are so small that they'd end up in one of those Top Ten Unbelievable Fails You Won't' Believe Could Happen videos on YouTube, just assume failure isn't possible.

You might also have to make some assumptions. Especially if you don't have all the information. You might not have prepared for the possibility that one of the whacko players might try to seduce the guard. And you really should have. Players are always seducing things. If it stands still long enough, a player will try to seduce it. Especially Thaldor. But maybe you didn't have much time to prepare. That's okay. The point is that you might not know the guard's marital status and sexual orientation. You might have to make them up on the spot. Some GMs will tell you to always give the players the benefit of the doubt. They call that "always saying yes." But that's like saying, "no matter what stupid thing the players do, just let them win." And that's the opposite of agency. Which is one of the hearts of the game from **Chapter 8**. So, I take a more balanced approach. I go with whatever feels right for the story. You can do whatever you want though. Just remember the other heart of the game from **Chapter 8**: be consistent. If you decide the guard is married, he's married. If he's a gay orcophile, that's what he is. Every time you adjudicate an action, you're creating the reality of the world. And the players will remember any facet of reality you invent. Be consistent.

If you decide that the action can succeed and that it can fail, you're not quite done. Put down the dice. You also have to decide if failure actually means anything. If failure just means the hero can try again and again until they succeed, then they haven't really failed. They can't fail. They can just keep trying until they succeed. Picking a lock, for example? That's usually a good example of a failure that changes nothing. If you fail to pick a lock, you can try again. And again. And again. Eventually you'll succeed. If failure doesn't change anything — the action carries no risk or no cost — just assume the action succeeds. It will eventually. No die roll needed.

And whatever you decide the action costs? That cost has to matter. Yes, every attempt to pick a lock takes time. But if you're not tracking time because the heroes have all the time in the world, that's not actually a cost. It's nothing. Of course, if the lock is on the outer casing of a time bomb, that's a different story.

That said, some actions have a cost or risk by their very nature. Players only get one turn per round in combat and they are only allowed to take one action per turn. Succeed or fail. That means every action they take in combat costs them the opportunity to do anything else. If they miss on an attack, that might not seem like much of a cost, but if they hadn't missed, the dire rat terrier might be dead instead of eating their face next round. Social actions also have costs and risks by their nature. Once you fail to seduce a guard, once he says no, future attempts become increasingly awkward or creepy and might eventually lead to a restraining order.

By the way, some editions of *Dungeons & Dragons* and the current edition of *Pathfinder* include these rules called "Taking 10" and "Taking 20." Basically, those rules say that if a hero has no time pressure and can just keep trying the same action over and over, you can just assume they roll a 10 or 20 on the die. Those are stupid rules. Don't use those rules. If there's no cost or risk and the heroes can just keep trying until they succeed, you don't need math at all. You don't need rules. They succeed.

Don't Screw the Players with the Impossible

You might determine that the heroes are attempting something that can't succeed. Something impossible. That's fine. But don't screw the players because they tried to take an action that should have been obviously impossible to any actual person in that actual situation. For example, imagine Tony Maring declares his intent to get a running start and jump over a frozen crevasse in Frostmarrow Pass as the party flees from Klaax the Malign. It's a 30-foot jump to a narrow ledge covered with ice and snow in a driving wind. The average running jump distance for a male human is about 8 feet. The record

distance for a running long jump under perfect conditions is about 29 feet. The jump isn't difficult. It's impossible.

So, you say, "Tony gets a good running start, leaps into the air, fighting the wind, falls short of the ledge by a good ten feet, plummets into the crevasse, gets wedged in the icy crack fifty feet down, and dies of a broken neck. Make a new character."

No offense, you're a jerk.

Look, the player probably should have known the jump was impossible. But maybe they were unclear about the distance involved. Maybe they misheard. Maybe you left out that detail when you set the scene. Maybe the player really thought such a jump was in the realm of possibility for a human. I had to look up that long jump stuff. I thought it was about 20 feet. Honestly, even if the player had it wrong, the character really should have recognized the impossibility of the situation.

Remember, you are the heroes' eyes, ears, and brain in the world. The players only know what you tell them they know. If a player attempts something impossible or very dangerous, especially something with a very high cost for failure, it's your job to make sure they know what they are getting into. And to be clear and concise. Don't snigger and ask, "Are you sure? Well, okay." Say, flat out, "That jump impossible. You'll miss. You'll probably die. And Tony knows it."

That doesn't mean you have to tell them everything. Just stuff they should know about what's possible in the magical, imaginary fantasy world you invented in your head which operates based on your own personal understanding of physical, metaphysical, and spiritual laws.

Thaldor has no way to know whether the guard is married or what races and sexes he's attracted to. Thaldor is taking a chance. Resolve the action and see how it works out. But if the guard is married, you might want to point out the wedding ring the guard is wearing and see if that changes the player's decision. It might. It might not. But you did your job. You were fair, and you were clear.

One Roll is Enough

If the action can succeed and if it can fail and if there's a risk or cost associated with the action, you can safely use the rules of the game to resolve it. And that usually means rolling dice. And when you roll dice, remember, one die roll is enough. You don't need more die rolls.

That might seem obvious. But some game systems have rules for complex situations that include multiple die rolls and require certain numbers of successes before certain numbers of failures and stuff like that. Usually, those are stupid rules. They don't add any excitement to the game. They just add more die rolls. And die rolls are speedbumps. Nothing is ever better with more speedbumps.

In those systems, each successful die roll represents the hero making progress toward their goal. It doesn't represent the hero accomplishing the goal. And you shouldn't do that. Except, sometimes, you should. Sometimes you do.

In combat, for example, when you successfully land an attack, you usually don't kill the target. You deal damage. You make progress toward eventually killing it. That works in combat because each round that a creature survives is a round in which it can fight back. The situation is constantly changing. But, outside of combat, dealing damage to make progress toward killing is usually a waste of time.

The same can be true in complex social interactions that play out as long conversations. Individual arguments and counterarguments might shift the opponent's perspective this way and that. A long back and forth might be appropriate. But for a single, short encounter like trying to bypass a guard, one roll will usually do.

And there are other times when multiple rolls might be useful. Like when each action expends a valuable resource and the stakes are high. Disarming a bomb is a good time to require a certain number of successful checks over multiple attempts. Suppose the bomb has a three-minute timer and every attempt to disarm it costs thirty seconds, whether it succeeds or fails. Each attempt carries a high cost. And there comes a point when the heroes might have to cut their losses and run because they can't succeed. And if they decide to run too late, they might not get out alive.

Doing What You Set Out to Do

After you resolve the action — either by using your brain or by using your brain and then using the rules — you're going to be left with a single word. Either success or failure. And now it's time for you to apply the outcome and describe the results. So, what does success look like? What does failure look like?

Well, the player already told you what success looks like. That's what their intent was. The guard lets them into the restricted area with a wink and a smile. Klaax circles overhead, searching for the hero, and eventually gives up and flies off. Whatever the hero was trying to do, that's what success is.

Unless the hero was just making progress *toward* success. Then you have to explain what that means in a way that clearly indicates they made progress. They got the outer casing off the bomb. The guard seems interested, he's listening, but he's skeptical. The dire rat terrier is injured; it's still fighting, but it's limping.

Failure is trickier though. What does failure mean? If all it means is that the hero didn't accomplish what they were trying to do, you didn't use Angry's Axioms properly. Because failure needs to carry

some cost or risk. It must change something. Otherwise, there's no reason the hero can't just keep trying until they succeed.

During a complex encounter or combat, failure might mean the hero didn't make progress, but there's still a cost associated with that. A wasted turn in combat, 30 seconds ticking off the bomb's timer, a stern looking guard who's losing his patience. Even if the outcome is just non-success, you have to present that non-success as something. And if you can't do that, you probably rolled a die roll you didn't have to roll. And now you're stuck. You should have listened to Angry.

Consequences Will Never Be the Same!

An RPG is more than just a string of actions and die rolls. It's a story. And that means it's not just about choices and outcomes, it's about consequences. And it's through consequences that you turn a simple action into a weighty choice that changes the world in some way.

Let's keep beating the dead horse that is Thaldor's seduction attempt. Either the attempt succeeds or it fails, right? Either the guard lets the party into the restricted area or he sends them away or raises the alarm or whatever. Done and done. Right? Well, no. Because that guard is going to remember the attempt. If it was successful, the guard is going to show up for a date. And then realize the whole thing was a lie. He's going to be hurt. He's going to be angry. Now, maybe that doesn't matter. Maybe it never matters. But if the heroes ever encounter that guard again, he's not going to believe anything they say. Assuming he isn't mad enough to seek them out and make trouble for them.

Every action has an outcome. But many actions also have consequences. Those are the far-reaching effects that ripple through the world. And that's important. First, consequences are direct proof to the players that their choices matter. When they run into that guard again and he's hurt and angry, they'll know that the story they're in is one they're writing, choice by choice. And it also proves that the world behaves in a consistent way. It tells the players they live in a real world that remembers what they do. That's two hearts of the game: agency and consistency.

But consequences also help differentiate actions by their approaches. And that's important too. In the rules, there's no difference between picking a lock and breaking down a door. Either way, you get through the door. The only difference is what ability modifier you apply and what skill bonus you add. Which means that every choice just comes down to choosing the action with the biggest number attached. That's not a fun game of choices; that's a math problem.

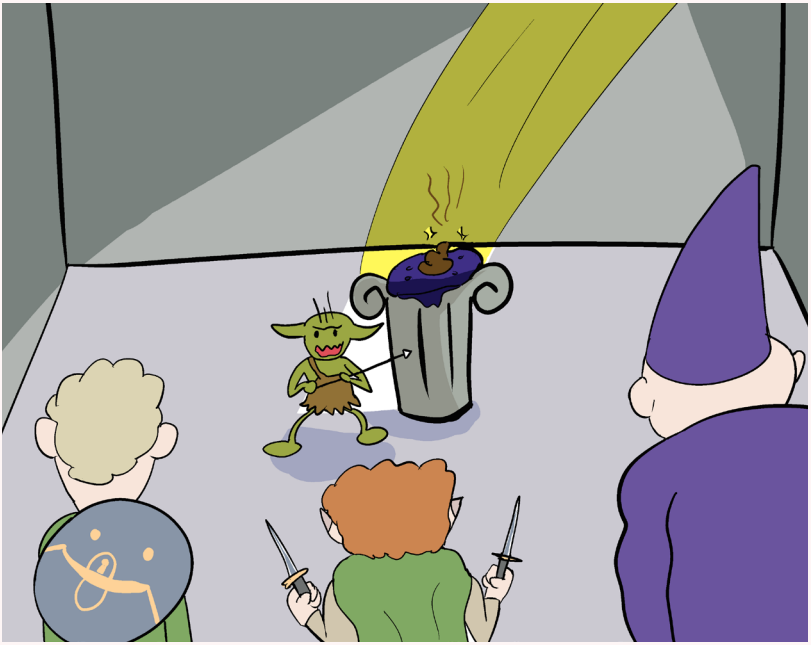
But if actions have consequences that spread out beyond the die roll, suddenly, those choices matter. Picking the lock is slow, but it's quiet. Breaking the door is quick, but it's loud. What matters more? It depends on the situation. And the risks the party is willing to take. Seducing the guard means lying to someone. They might remember. They might be hurt or angry. Killing the guard doesn't leave the party with a rival running around the world, but it does turn a simple break-in into a murder charge if they get caught. And someone might find the body before the party gets clear of the area.

Whenever the players attempt an action — whether they succeed or fail — you've got to consider the consequences. You have to consider how their action — and specifically how their approach — changed the world. Make note of the resentful guard, the carelessly hidden corpse waiting to be discovered, the trap that was bypassed but not actually disarmed. And wait for those things to become important. When the party is making their escape after triggering the alarm, that active trap is going to be a problem they have to take at a run. And the next time they encounter a guard in this wing of the palace, it might be that resentful guard. Now, some of those consequences will never be important. The party might be long gone before the corpse is discovered. But a good GM makes sure some of those things do become important.

And don't forget positive consequences too. If the players choose to be polite and deferent to some king, that king will remember. He'll be happy to help the players again. The world remembers good stuff too. Consequences aren't good or bad. They're just what they are. They are just the world remembering the things the players did. And proving they have agency.

Chapter 11:

Encountering Resistance



The heroes' actions don't happen in a vacuum. As explained in **Chapter 9**, they happen inside scenes and encounters. And those scenes and encounters give the players context for their choices. They help the players decide what to do moment by moment by giving them something to shoot for. Something they're trying to accomplish. Without a good scene around them, the heroes won't know whether they should talk to the fiendish imp, capture it, or kill it. But if the imp is in a scene guarding the coveted Orb of Macguffin, attacking it is probably safe bet. On the other hand, if they imp is in a scene running a magic item shop, attacking it might be considered rude. Or it might get the heroes a better deal.

Beyond providing context, scenes and encounters also help you structure the game. The whole conversation that is a role-playing game relies on you setting the scene, resolving actions, and then transitioning to a new scene or encounter. And the scenes and encounters themselves just add up to the path the heroes take

through an adventure. Each scene and each encounter is just a stepping stone on the path to the heroes' ultimate goal.

If the heroes are out to rescue a beautiful dragon from an evil princess, they might have to pass through the Forest of Taffeta. As they navigate the forest, they might pass through the Lair of Luxuria, the Silk-Spinning Death Spider. Eventually, the heroes come to the Bedazzling Tower of Sequins. They have to get through the outer gate of course. And the Garden of Beautiful but Deadly Acid Fountains in the grounds. Then they can enter the tower. They might climb the stairs and explore the Chamber of Confusing Mirrors where they can find the Scepter of Radiance. Or they might sneak down into the dungeons to free the beautiful dragon, only to discover they need the Princess' dungeon key. So, they climb the tower to the Princess' Evil Velvet Bedchamber. And each of those steps? Those are scenes.

The same is true of any adventure. Investigating the crime scene in a murder mystery? That's a scene. Shadowing the informant as he heads to his meeting in a spy thriller? That's a scene. Scenes are basically the building blocks of adventures.

But what is a scene? A **scene** is just a chunk of the game in which the heroes take one or more actions to accomplish something specific. And they are usually bounded in space and time. That is, the heroes are trying to accomplish a specific thing in a specific place over a certain period of time.

When the heroes try to get information from the bartender at the Red Heron Bar & Grill, that's a scene. It begins when the heroes enter the bar and approach Two-Eyed Jake, the cyclops with a birth defect who runs the place. And it ends when they have the information. Or when they leave without the information. Or when Two-Eyed Jake has the party kicked out by his pair of one-eyed bouncers. Who, incidentally, are not cyclopes. They're just humans who each lost an eye to the other in a freak thumb wrestling accident. But they learned a valuable lesson about friendship as a result and now they're inseparable.

More simply, a scene begins when the GM sets the scene, provides a goal, and invites the players to act. It ends when the players have accomplished or failed to accomplish their goal and the GM transitions the players out of the scene and into a new scene.

When is a Scene Not a Scene

You might have noticed I've suddenly started using the phrase "scenes and encounters." Which implies that scenes and encounters are related things. Even similar things. But which have some key differences between them. Congratulations. You're very good at reading context.

An **encounter** is a specific type of scene in which there's something between the heroes and their goal. If the heroes walk into the Red Heron, meet Two-Eyed Jake, have a nice conversation, get the information they need, pay for their drinks, and leave, that's a scene. But if Two-Eyed Jake won't talk and the players have to wheedle, threaten, and cajole him — by taking actions and rolling dice — then it's an encounter. Basically, if the heroes encounter resistance, the scene is an encounter. That's not why they are called encounters, though. It's just an old gaming term.

I should note, though, that some games use the word "encounter" specifically referring to fights that break out in the game. That is, encounter is sometimes used as a synonym for combat. Those games are wrong. An encounter doesn't have to be a fight. An encounter is any scene in which the heroes encounter resistance.

Asking Dramatic Questions

If this book were about writing screenplays, I'd define a scene in terms of its dramatic question. In a movie, the dramatic question is the thing that we — the audience — are waiting to find out when we watch a scene. When the Nazis are chasing Indiana Jones and his dad during their escape from Brunwald Castle, we're asking ourselves "will Indy and his dad get away safely?" That's the dramatic question.

Now, RPGs don't have audiences. And they aren't movies. But they do have dramatic questions. That's because the heroes have goals and we're playing the game to see if the heroes can actually pull them off. The **dramatic question** in an RPG scene is basically just a statement of the heroes' goals in the scene phrased as a question. "Can the heroes get the information from Two-Eyed Jake?" "Can the heroes steal the dungeon key from the evil princess without being caught?" "Can the heroes safely pass through the Lair of Luxuria and continue their journey?"

Every scene in a role-playing game needs a dramatic question. The players can't play the game without a goal. And you can't run a scene if you don't know what the point of the scene is. Moreover, you don't know when the scene is over if you don't know why the scene is happening. So you never know when it's time to transition to a new scene.

When the heroes walk into the Red Heron and approach Two-Eyed Jake, the dramatic question hangs in the air. "Can the heroes get the information they need from Jake?" If they walk over to Jake, strike up a conversation, get the information, and leave, the answer is "yes." They got the information. Scene over. And that wasn't very dramatic at all. The question was settled almost as soon as it was asked. The whole scene was just playing out the answer. That's

fine some of the time. But it doesn't make for an exciting game if everything's that simple.

So, you turn some of the scenes into encounters.

Encountering Conflict

Here's the situation: the heroes are trying to find out who paid the famous brother and sister crime duo Lumpy Stilt's Kin to burn down the House of Sticks on Sprat Street. The pair — offspring of a hideously ugly and famously tall cat burglar – controls the whole neighborhood. Everyone's afraid of them. Even Two-Eyed Jake. Because the Stilts have made it clear that they'll do unspeakable things to Jake's pet cat, Spot, if they talk. Jake doesn't want to talk to anyone, let alone a bunch of heroic do-gooder protagonists.

And voila. Scene becomes encounter. Because there's a conflict. Conflict occurs whenever the different participants in a scene have goals in opposition. The heroes want information about Lumpy Stilt's kin. Jake doesn't want to share the information he has with anyone because he's afraid of the Stilts. The heroes can't have their goal if Jake fulfills his. And Jake can't fulfill his goal if the heroes accomplish theirs. Conflict.

And that's what an encounter is. An encounter is a scene in which some conflict prevents us from easily answering the dramatic question. The question can't be answered until the conflict is resolved somehow. Either the heroes give up their goal or try to get the information some other way. Or Jake gives up the information despite his fears. Or his fears are quashed. Or he's dead and there's no way to get the information out of him. However, the conflict is resolved, once the dramatic question is answered — with a firm yes or no — the scene is over.

Actually Building and Running Encounters

So, that's what an encounter is. But how do you actually build and run a good encounter? Well, you just need to identify two things. Then, you can pretty much just play the encounter out, action by action and round by round. But there are two other things that might be helpful.

Each encounter must have a single dramatic question. It must have one or more sources of conflict. An encounter might also need some extra decision points. And a good structure can help you run a complex encounter. Let's break all those bits down.

Posing the Dramatic Question

Every encounter must have a dramatic question. It begins when the GM sets the scene and poses the dramatic question and it ends when that question has been firmly answered. Or when the question

is discarded. The dramatic question frames the whole encounter, it defines when the encounter begins and ends, and it tells everyone what the heroes are trying to accomplish.

Imagine the heroes are wandering through the Sludge Caves. They come to a passage that dead-ends in a small chamber. In the middle of the chamber is a purple ooze. There's nothing else in the room. No exits. Nothing of interest. Just a dead-end room with a purple ooze. Is that an encounter? No. Because there's no dramatic question. The heroes have no reason to enter the room. The ooze has no reason to engage the heroes. And even if the ooze did come after the heroes, they could just turn and walk away.

Alternatively, if there's a treasure chest in the room, well, the heroes might have a reason to go into the room. The treasure chest becomes a dramatic question: "can the heroes open the chest and find out what's inside?" Or, if there's an exit on the other side of the room, the heroes might have a reason to cross the room. "Can the heroes safely pass through the Purple Ooze Room and continue their exploration?"

Posing a dramatic question is simply about giving the players something to shoot for and daring them to go get it. "Go on, go for the chest, I dare you." You're not actually asking the players a question, but you might as well be. You're presenting a goal and asking them if they are bad enough dudes to accomplish it.

Notice that posing a dramatic question is very similar to inviting the players to act like I described back in **Chapter 5**. Getting the players to do stuff is pretty much the number one skill every GM has to master. And it's usually about dangling stuff in front of them and then taunting them about it.

Now, sometimes, the players will pose their own dramatic questions. For example, some heroes will charge into dead end rooms and attack innocent purple oozes for no clear reason. Players are like that. And if your players do that, you need to identify the dramatic question they've decided is suddenly important quickly. Because you're running an encounter now, bub. Ready or not. The question might be "can the players ransack this completely empty room that they've arbitrarily decided must contain a hidden treasure" or "can the players senselessly beat the mother-loving snot out of an innocent purple ooze that meant them absolutely no harm."

Sometimes, the players will also reject a dramatic question for some crazy reason. You might pose the question "can the heroes open the treasure chest and find out what's inside?" And they might answer, "nah, we're good" and walk away. Technically, what they've done is resolve the question with a firm "meh." That counts. Scene over. Transition out and move on.

If you're running a published adventure, you might have a very difficult challenge in front of you. Because, apparently, many professional freaking game designers can't be bothered with such basic storytelling and game design concepts as dramatic questions and how to properly stage encounters. Lots of published adventures are filled with dead-end rooms and innocent purple oozes. Just like when your players inexplicably invent their own dramatic questions and you scramble to figure out what the heck they're doing, you might have to do the same thing whenever a published adventure provides an encounter with an unclear dramatic question and the heroes rush in and start encountering anyway. Good luck.

Knowing When an Encounter Ends

Dramatic questions turn boring scenes into exciting encounters. And what makes them exciting is that no one knows the answer to the question. Once the question is answered, the excitement is over. So, you have to be ready to end an encounter as soon as the dramatic question is firmly answered. Otherwise, the encounter will quickly become boring.

For example, if the heroes are fighting a dozen goblins with the dramatic question of "can the heroes survive the goblin ambush" looming overhead, you might think the question isn't answered until every goblin has been routed or killed. But that's not quite true. If most of the goblins are dead and the few remainders are trying to retreat, and the heroes keep pushing the attack and no one is badly hurt and its obvious the heroes have won, the encounter is over. Now, everyone is just rolling dice to mop up. At that point, a good GM will simply narrate the hell out of the scene. "You drive off the last of the goblins. You won. Good job. Now you can loot the bodies or continue on your way."

But that's not the hard part. It's easy to tell when the question has ended in the heroes' favor. It's a lot harder to recognize when it's been answered with a no. With a fail.

Consider the encounter with Two-Eyed Jake again. The heroes enter the Red Heron, they ask Jake what he knows, he says he doesn't know anything. The heroes assume he's lying. They demand he tell them the truth. He says he is telling the truth. The heroes ask him what he knows again. Jake insists he doesn't know anything. And round and round it goes.

And that will go on forever if you let it. Players are thick. They don't take subtle for an answer. It's up to you to decide when the dramatic question has been answered with a firm "no" and force the players to understand. Especially in social encounters. Most people have only a limited patience. Once a conversation goes on too long, they are done. They aren't going to give anything. And once someone

has put up enough resistance, it's safe to assume they can resist forever.

Fortunately, you have the power of narration on your side. You can eventually stop responding to individual actions and just say, "you keep pleading with Jake, but he won't break. It goes on for a half hour before you're forced to admit you're not going to get anything out of him by talking. You're going to have to move on." Force the heroes to leave the encounter or, at least, to start a new encounter. Once you tell the heroes they can't succeed by talking, hopefully one of them will say "okay, Brimsor, go get the duck and the garden hose; we'll do this the hard way."

Be as heavy handed as you need to be. Narrate the players right out of the scene before they know what's what. But never, ever let an encounter keep going once the dramatic question has been answered. For better or for worse.

Inviting Conflict

Conflict is what makes an encounter an encounter. Otherwise, it's just a scene. You play out the answer to the dramatic question and move on. But, as a GM, you can't actually create conflict. The only thing you can do is create sources of conflict. Which is a technicality, but an important one. Remember, you didn't actually crash any trains, you just put them on the same track at the same time and let nature take its course.

The purple ooze, for example, is not a conflict. It's not even a source of conflict. It's just an ooze. A conflict occurs when opposing goals have to fight it out to determine the answer to a dramatic question. You need to define the ooze's goal. If the ooze is a mindless eating machine that tries to engulf anything that comes in range of its senses, that's a source of conflict. And if it's sitting next to the treasure chest that the heroes want to open, there's going to be a conflict. They want to approach the chest. The ooze wants to eat anything that approaches.

Same with Two-Eyed Jake. He's not a conflict. Not even a source of conflict. The source of conflict is Jake's desire to protect his cat by keeping his mouth shut. And his two bouncers? Not conflicts either. The source of conflict is that Right-Eye and Left-Eye are loyal to Jake. Because he pays them.

Sources of conflict are the reasons why something in the scene is opposing the players' goals. And by thinking in terms of those reasons, you can figure out how the scene plays out regardless of any cunning plans or crazy capers the players come up with. If the heroes stick to the edges of the room to cross to the far side, will the slime chase them? No. Because it only wants to eat things that get within its limited sensory range. If they run away from the slime,

will it chase? Yes, but only until they move beyond its limited sensory range. If they taunt it, will it respond? No. Can they befriend it? No. Can they distract it with food? Yes. See? You can answer these questions easily as long as you know what the actual source of conflict is.

If the heroes threaten Jake, will Right-Eye and Left-Eye jump in? Yes. That's their job. If the players bribe Jake, will he talk? Probably not. He's scared, not greedy. If the players offer to protect Jake or his cat, will he talk? Maybe. If he believes they can actually protect him. If the players try to buy-off Right-Eye and Left-Eye, will that work? Possibly. They are just hired help. But it'll cost them a lot. See how this works?

The Power of Personification

By the way, it's important to know that conflicts don't have to be living, thinking things. There's this famous thing that liberal arts majors like to point out while they're making your latte down at the Java Hut about how there's only five possible conflicts in any story: people against themselves, people against people, people against society, people against nature, and people against the supernatural. Notice how some of those things aren't actual, thinking things.

In a story, you can represent anything as a thinking, feeling antagonist. And you should. A door isn't just a hunk of wood, it's a barrier that wants to keep people out. That's its motivation. Its source of conflict. A trap wants to detect intruders and kill them. A river wants to stop travelers from crossing and drown them if they try. Cliffs want to drop people to their death. Waves want to sweep people off the deck of the ship and drag them to a watery grave.

When building encounters, you must think like this. Think in terms of a malevolent world filled with natural and supernatural forces with goals and desires that put them in opposition to the heroes. Think like one of those video games where every living thing and every bit of architecture and every piece of terrain is all trying to kill you.

The Point of Making Decisions

Every encounter must have a dramatic question and it must have one or more sources of conflict. Otherwise, there's no encounter at all. And no reason to roll dice. But even with a good dramatic question and a source of conflict, an encounter can fall flat. Because encounters also need decision points.

A **decision point** is a spot where the players get to actively decide what course of action to take. During a battle, the players can decide whether to attack or cast a spell and which target to attack and where to move and all that crap. They make lots of decisions.

And during a social encounter, the players decide what to say and what arguments to make and how to respond and when to duck and when to run. Now, consider a chase scene.

Say the heroes have tracked down Lumpy Stilt's kin. They've caught Brother Stilt, but Sister Stilt escaped out the back door. She heads into a maze of back alleys. The heroes give chase. Can they catch her before she manages to evade them completely?

What can the players do? Well, they can chase Sister Stilt. And they can… umm… chase her more? What seems like it should be an exciting encounter is actually missing something vital. It's missing decision points.

Combat encounters and social interaction encounters come with a whole bunch of built in decision points. You don't need to think about whether the players actually get to make any choices. Because those scenes naturally include lots of decisions. But when you build a non-combat, non-social encounter, you realize you've been spoiled. Because most encounters aren't so loaded with choices.

If an encounter only offers one very obvious option and requires the players to do a lot of creative, out-of-the-box thinking to come up with anything else, well, the players are usually just going to keep doing the obvious thing until they win. Or lose. It just becomes an exercise in taking the same actions and rolling the same dice over and over. Not fun at all.

It's your job to provide other options and to make sure the players know about them. That is, you have to signpost those options. That's what we call it in the business. Because, remember, the players only know what you tell them about the world. You have to be obvious for them to notice anything. Players are dumb and unimaginative unless you inspire them. And they need big, flashing neon signs to be inspired.

If this sounds a lot like that driving the action thing from **Chapter 5**, well, that's because it is that driving the action thing. GMing is basically just doing the same thing over and over but calling it something different each time.

What might the players do during the chase? Well, they might climb up onto the rooftops to keep Sister Stilt in sight and to have an unimpeded path. Maybe there's a ladder or an easily climbable scaffolding leaning against the alley wall inviting a player to climb it. They might try to take an alternate path or shortcut to get ahead of Sister Stilt and cut her off. Make sure you describe the crisscrossing alleys that all switchback and double-back on themselves and all the alternate routes leading off the alley the heroes are in. Describe the thronging crowd that's slowing Sister Stilt so the beefy heroes might get the idea of plowing through the crowd to gain speed.

But don't mistake reactions for decisions either. If Sister Stilt sends a barrel or cart rolling down the alley at the heroes and everyone has to make a saving throw to dodge it, that's not a decision. It's just a die roll. It's okay to have some of those in an encounter, but they don't count as decision points.

An encounter without decision points is boring. Once there's no decisions left to make in an encounter, you might as well resolve it with a single die roll.

Building a Structure

Encounters need dramatic questions and sources of conflict. And they need decision points too. And that's usually enough to make a good encounter. But sometimes, encounters can get complicated. Sometimes, there's lots of stuff going on. And sometimes, it's hard to tell when a dramatic question has been firmly answered. And that's when an encounter needs a structure.

A **structure** is just a set of rules that help you keep track of things. The combat rules in your game of choice are a good example of an encounter structure. That's all they are. They just provide rules for keeping track of who's where and who can act when and what people can do and who's winning and who's losing. Hit Points are basically just the scoreboard for a combat.

Here's a secret: you can add a structure for any encounter. You can break an encounter down into turns. You can add some kind of scoreboard. Whatever you need to do. That chase scene could benefit from being broken down into turns. Sister Stilt covers a certain amount of ground every turn. And she might do something like dodge down an alley or overturn a cart in the heroes' paths. And then the heroes can cover a certain amount of ground and take an action each. Just like in combat, turns become resources. Which allows players to take actions like sprinting. If they succeed, they cover more ground. If they fail, they get winded and lose ground. Sprinting wouldn't work in an abstract chase. It has no risk or cost. It's not an action worth adjudicating. But if it costs a turn — a limited resource — well, now it does have a cost.

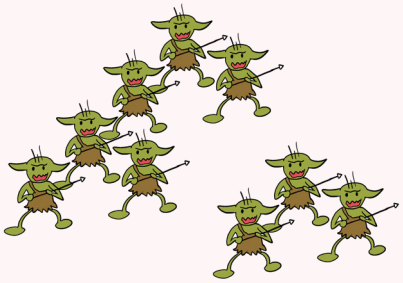
Scoreboards can also help. Obviously, in the chase scene, you want to keep track of the distance between Sister Stilt and the heroes. That way, you can decide when she's so far ahead that the chase becomes a search. And when she's gotten away. And the distance might determine what people can do. Once a hero gets close enough to Sister Stilt, a flying tackle might end the chase.

Those are two of my favorite sort of ad-hoc structures to add. Whenever an encounter needs to play out from moment to moment and seconds count, a turn structure is a great way to manage the encounter. And when you need to keep track of progress toward

success or failure, a scoreboard is great. I usually just pull out something I call “Angry’s Ten-Point Scale.” That’s just a simple score counter that runs from 1 to 10. At 1, the bad thing happens. At 10, the good thing happens. Successes move the score up. Failures move the score down.

In a social encounter, for example the scene with Two-Eyed Jake, the ends of the ten-point scale might be “gives up the information” and “gets frustrated and calls the bouncers to start a combat encounter.”

And that is the biggest, most important secret to being a good GM. Not just for running encounters, but for running the entire game. The rules, the mechanics, those are your tools. Use them, ignore them, change them, manipulate them, and even invent new ones. Do whatever you need to do to figure out how the game plays out. As long as you’re running an engaging game and the players have agency and you’re being consistent, it’s all good.



Chapter 12:
Being Other People

An RPG provides the players with an action-packed, exciting game. That's why RPG stands for role-playing game not role-playing experience or something. Most players like a good challenge. They like to win at something. But there's that RP part too. Role-playing. That's about playing roles in a story. Most players like that, too.

So, a role-playing game is a fun game that is also a good story. And the players are the heroes of the story. At least, they're the protagonists. Considering some of the awful things I've seen players do, calling them heroes is really a stretch. That's why RPGs usually cut through the question by calling the players' characters **PCs**. Which means **player-characters**.

But the PCs aren't the only characters in the story. They're just the five or so characters controlled by the players. There are all sorts of other characters, too. Kings and queens to send the PCs on their quests. Innkeepers and bartenders and blacksmiths to take the PC's money. There's wise sages and blind seers and hooded strangers to feed the PCs cryptic clues. And there's all sorts of monsters and

mooks and villains and henchpersons that provide some much-need antagonism.

All of those other characters are called **NPCs**. **Non-player characters**. Because they're controlled by not the players. And there's only one other person to control or portray the characters controlled by not the players. And that's you. The GM.

Most GMs think of NPCs as furniture. They're just another game element for the PCs to poke and prod at. And that's partly true. After all, the role of hooded stranger can be just as easily filled by a piece of paper with a cryptic clue written on it. But NPCs do more than just fill some game purpose. They bring the world to life. They make the world seem like it's a real place where real people live and work and farm and go on quests and hand out cryptic clues to strangers in bars. Unlike doors and chests and pieces of paper, NPCs can think and act for themselves. They don't just react to the PCs, they have goals of their own. They can take actions of their own.

You can fill a world with nothing but furniture NPCs. The heroes might spend their time exploring dungeons, killing mindless orcs and goblins and skeletons and ocelots who fling themselves at the PCs with nary a thought for their own survival. After the PCs plough through the mook *du jour* and gather up their possessions, they return to town. They tick off gold and recover their hit points to reflect that stay at the inn and adjust their character sheets to reflect the arrows and potions they buy from the equipment list. It's all just murdering, scavenger hunting, and bookkeeping. Nary another actual soul in sight. And there's nothing wrong with that. Some players — and some GMs — love that sort of game. Especially submission-seekers. But those players would also be just as happy playing *Diablo III* on their console of choice.

For players who actually want a little RP to go with their G, that's not enough. The world will feel flat, empty, and dead. It'll feel like the PCs are the only living things in the world. And that's why NPCs are important. They let the players feel like they're sharing a living, breathing world with a bunch of other living, breathing people.

The GM's PCs

An NPC is any character in the story that isn't played by a player. And that means they're played by you. But what does that mean? Well, it means that you need to do exactly what the players do. When there's an NPC in the game, you imagine the situation, consider the NPC's goals, and make the choice the NPC would make in that situation. An NPC is basically just your PC.

When Argylefraster Periwinkle is trying to squeeze information out of some poor peasant farmer who doesn't want to cross the local lord by outing him as a vampire to the big damn heroes and

Argylefraster suddenly says "I can make this guy talk; I just need a piece of soap, three pieces of string, and an open-faced helmet," you have to figure out what the farmer does. Is he more scared of the local vampire lord or whatever terrible thing he's imagining Argylefraster is about to do with soap, string, and a helmet? Does he think the PCs are bluffing? Will he risk calling their bluff? Will he talk? Resist? Beg and plead?

But here's where it gets complicated. Yes, you're playing the farmer. He's your character, basically. And he has to decide what to do. But you're also the GM. And the players have declared an action. You need to adjudicate that action. Just like you'd adjudicate any action. It's just that the target of that action happens to be an actual, thinking, feeling character in the story.

And man does that difference ever screw with the average GM's head. Seriously. For some reason, actions involving NPCs just blow most GM's minds. And I'll never understand why.

Before I said all that crap about NPCs above, if I asked you to adjudicate it when the PCs stop a random passerby on the street and ask for directions to the tavern, what would you do? You'd say, "well, the PCs are trying to get directions by politely asking a citizen of the town. Can that succeed? Sure. Can it fail? Maybe a little. Is there anything keeping the PCs from doing it again if they fail? No. Okay, they just get the information. Done."

But that's not role-playing. You aren't thinking about the dude or dudette as a character in the world. They're just a prop. Just a thing in the game that might or might not give information in response to an action. And maybe a die roll.

NPCs are living, breathing characters, but they are also just game elements. And you can't stop running the game just because you're trying to tell a good story. And that means you have to distinguish the NPCs who are actual characters and who drive encounters from the NPCs who are just furniture. The NPCs who are just props with personalities.

Props with Personality

A **prop with personality** is an NPC that exists just to fill some game purpose. Their goals don't provide sources of conflict. They don't provide any meaningful resistance. They are just set dressing. Theoretically, you can just narrate interactions with props with personality as you would describe the outcome of any action. You can just say, "you ask around and a friendly yokel gives you directions to Bebe's Bed and Breakfast on B Street." Done and done.

But that doesn't really give the impression that the world is a real place filled with living, breathing people. That's wasting an

opportunity to make the fantasy-seekers and narrative-seekers happy by bringing the world to life.

So, you don't merely narrate the outcome, you portray the NPC. You playact. That's not the same, by the way, as role-playing. Role-playing is making decisions. Portraying a character is acting. And props with personality don't get role-played. They get acted.

When to Play the Part

You don't want to waste game time acting out every interaction with every NPC prop with personality. Some GMs really love chewing the scenery. They play every character to the hilt. Hell, I play a lot of NPCs myself. I love acting. I admit it. I was a theater geek in high school. Lifetime Member of the International Thespian Society. That's me. Man, I was such a dork then.

Thing is, every time you decide to portray a prop with personality and play out an interaction, you're slowing down the game and shining a big ole spotlight on the scene. And the players will assume you're doing that for a reason. The players notice when you cover stuff with single lines of narration and when you get all prosey and describey and playacty. And they assume there's a reason. And that's an important tool in your arsenal. It helps you speed the players past useless crap and get them to pay attention to actual important scenes. Unless you confuse them by getting prosey and playacty all the freaking time.

Beyond that, to really play a character well, you need some give and take. The players have to play their parts too. And if the players don't get into their roles and join in the thespian fun, the scene will fall flat. While some players love chewing the scenery and playing their characters to the scene, a lot of players aren't comfortable with it. Or they can only get into it when something important is going on.

So, you only get into character when you have a good reason. If the scene is important and you want the heroes to pay attention, find your motivation and start mugging. If you want to introduce a new character that's going to be important later, warm up your pipes. When you want to establish a certain mood or slow the game down or add some tension — which I'll talk more about in **Chapter 14** — get ready for your closeup, Mr. De Mille. If you want to establish how friendly the town is and how likeable the people are right before the Inexplicably Technologically Advanced Empire from One Town Over attacks, head over to makeup and get ready to go on. And if the PCs have spent a long time in a dungeon or in the wilderness and they haven't had any social interactions in a long time and they run into a guide who can provide a little actual human contact [[NOTE TO SELF: COME UP WITH ANOTHER DUMB ACTING METAPHOR TO PUT HERE BEFORE SENDING TO PRINTER]]

Point is, if you've got a reason to play out a social interaction instead of just covering with a simple line of narration, go ahead and play it out. And any reason will do. When the players first visit a new town, I often play out simple interactions like requests for information or shopping trips just to set the mood of the town. And if the players who like acting haven't spent much time in character, I try to give them some spotlight time by playing out an NPC interaction. That's the key. Your props with personality are just props. They're there to serve the game or to serve the story. Use them. And take your cues from the players.

How to Play the Part

Some GMs really love this acting crap. And they're good at it. Or they think they are. So, they play their NPCs like they're going for an Oscar for Best Supporting Townsperson in a Dramatic Role-Playing Game. And that's stupid. Because, again, players take their cues from you about who's important. If every NPC has a bombastic, over-the-top personality, they all seem important. Even the props with personality. Besides, playing every NPC that way makes the world seem like a cartoon. The world ends up so full of wacky screwballs and pompous gasbags and pontificating egomaniacs and flowery fops that it just looks fake. People can't take that seriously.

Besides, it's hard to keep that up.

I like to keep things simple and keep them fairly real. And that's why I use Angry's Patented Four P's of Playacting: Personality, Posture, Pause, and Pfidget.

Personality is just the way the NPC talks. Their tone and their word choice. I pick a single word to describe the way an NPC speaks and use that to flavor what I say as the NPC. It takes some time to get good at it, but it's easy to practice when you're away from the table. Try this simple exercise whenever you have some down time.

First, pick a simple phrase. Something like "I don't have the information you're looking for." Second, come up with a list of different one-word personalities. Like polite, impatient, suspicious, paranoid, insane, and flirty. Now, try coming up with a way to say your phrase that matches each personality.

> ***Polite:*** *Sorry friend, I don't know.*
> ***Impatient:*** *How should I know? Leave me alone.*
> ***Suspicious:*** *I don't know. Who are you anyway?*
> ***Paranoid:*** *Why would I know? Why are you asking me? What's this about?*
> ***Crazy:*** *They ask us, but we don't know. Why do they think we'd know, precious? We don't know anything. Do we, precious?*
> ***Flirty:*** *Don't know. But I wish I did. I bet you'd make the answer worth my while.*

Practice with different phrases and different personalities. Eventually, all you'll need is a single word to guide the way your NPCs talk.

Posture refers to the way you're sitting or standing at the table. That's you, the GM, not the NPC. If you adopt a certain posture and maintain it, it'll do two things. First, it'll change the way you talk subtly. It'll change the speed and tone with which you speak. Sit ramrod straight and hold yourself stiffly and you'll speak in a stiff, stuffy way. You can't help it. Slouch and lower your head and you'll tend to mutter or drawl more. Second, your body language will provide a cue to the players. They'll actually perceive you differently.

A verbal **pause** is a noise you make to indicate you're thinking. Like when your girlfriend asks you what movie you want to see? You say, "um" to indicate that you heard her and your brain has started working and it will provide an answer in a moment. It basically serves the same purpose as the spinning hourglass or Apple logo in a computer. Now, that's important because playacting is tough. Especially when you're trying to portray a character while you're also trying to do all the other stuff you have to do to run a game. Like adjudicate actions and remember the plot. The point is, you'll even need to buy time to figure out what the NPC should say next. But you can use that to portray the NPC too. Simply figure out a specific noise or gesture or thing an NPC does to indicate they're thinking and use that when you need to buy time. A potato-eating farmer might issue a long, drawling "errrrrr" when he's getting ready to talk. An elderly scholar might repeat the question quietly to himself while thinking. "Ghouls, ghouls, ghouls, what do I know about ghouls? Let me see." Winnie the Pooh used to knock on the side of his head to get his brain working. A pause can be a physical gesture too.

A **pfidget** is a nervous tic or physical habit. It's something you do with your body unconsciously. Yeah, some people spell it "fidget," but I can't do that. Otherwise, I'd have to call all this Angry's Patented Three Ps and One F of Playacting. That'd ruin the alliteration.

A pfidget is just a little physical thing you do repeatedly while you're portraying an NPC. Like taking a puff from an imaginary pipe, wringing your hands, steepling your fingers, shuffling papers, or whatever. It's a little bit of physical acting. It's emoting. Pfidgets are useful because players will associate them with the NPC you're portraying and make assumptions about the NPCs. Steepling your fingers is sinister. It's a villain thing. Shuffling papers is bureaucratic. Wringing your hands is nervous. But, to get pfidgets to work right, you have to do them constantly. And that might seem like overacting. But that's how acting is. You have to overdo it if you want it to be noticeable. That's why characters who smoke in movies don't just smoke occasionally. They are always lighting a cigarette or

discarding a cigarette or taking a puff from a cigarette or asking for a light. In every scene. And alcoholics take a swig from a flask or bottle in every scene.

The Four Ps are very handy because they provide a very short list of things you can write down to remind you how to play the NPC. And, while they make it seem like you studied for acting for ten years under Uta Hagan or Konstantin Stanislavsky or Nicholas Cage, they're so simple that they might as well be in *Acting for Dummies*. Fortunately, your players won't know the difference.

Acting Beyond Playacting

Playacting with the Four Ps is an easy way to give all the props in your world some personality. They let you inject some personality into a simple scene when nothing's at stake. But sometimes your NPCs will find themselves in actual encounters. They might end up providing sources of conflict for the PCs. And then the PCs might actually take social actions against your NPCs in an attempt to resolve things.

I call these actions **social inter-actions**. That's because they're actions, in the RPG sense of the word, and they need to be adjudicated. But involve the PCs trying to accomplish their goals by interacting socially with another character. An NPC. They might be trying to get information out of someone, they might be trying to negotiate a price for something, they might be trying to defuse a hostage situation, or they might be trying to get help from some bureaucratic official. And they might be using persuasion, reason, deception, intimidation, or any other social tactic to get what they want.

Now, a social inter-action is still an action. And that means you adjudicate it like any other action. But, for some reason, the moment an action involves a conversation, GMs lose their minds. It's like they forget the rules even exist. So, I'm going to walk through adjudicating social inter-actions just to avoid any confusion.

Declaring a Social Inter-Action

The first confusing thing about social inter-actions is that it doesn't seem like the players are declaring actions at all. The players — as their PCs — are just talking. Now, the players might be speaking in the first person — speaking *as* their characters — or they might be speaking in the third person — speaking *about* their characters. That doesn't matter. There's no difference between "Shawn Salmonbane pleads with the king to send soldiers to reinforce the pass before the imperial army can march on the kingdom" and "please, your majesty, you must send a legion of soldiers to reinforce Convenience

Pass. Otherwise, the Evil Empire from One Town Away will march unopposed and lay waste to Bordertown."

Social inter-actions *are* action declarations. They just take some translation. The player is trying to accomplish something. And they are using a particular approach to accomplish it. You just have to figure out what and how. In the above example, the player is trying to convince the king to send soldiers to Convenience Pass to guard it against the evil empire. That's the intent. The approach is pleading with the king. Or perhaps, appealing to the King's duty to defend the Kingdom's borders.

It doesn't help that players say lots of things during social scenes and encounters. And not all the things they say are really actions. Not all of them have clear intentions. And not all of them involve a useful approach. The players might start the hostage negotiation by introducing themselves and asking for the hostage-taker's name. That's not any kind of action that might accomplish anything. It's just opening a conversation. And just saying please is rarely a strong enough approach to accomplish anything substantial. No matter what Mr. Rogers taught you. Sorry.

During social scenes, you spend a lot of time watching and listening and waiting for the players to say something that really does count as an action. Something that can accomplish something. Those are the social inter-actions. The rest is just acting out a conversation.

Adjudicating Through Objections and Incentives

Once the players have actually managed to say something that counts as a social inter-action and you've managed to pick out the intention and the approach, you can adjudicate the action. And, as with all actions, you have to go through all the standard rigamarole I spelled out in **Chapter 10**. Can the action succeed? Can it fail? You can usually skip the part about whether they can just keep trying until they succeed. Because conversations rarely work like that. Most of the time, if a polite request fails the first time, it won't succeed on the fifteenth try either. And once a lie fails, it generally keeps failing. And it makes all future lies less believable too.

But how do you decide if a social inter-action can succeed and if it can fail? This is where an NPC becomes more than just a prop with personality. You have to know what the NPC wants. Or, to put it in the language of encounters from **Chapter 11**, you have to identify the source of the conflict. Basically, you have to know why the NPC might refuse to comply with whatever the PCs are asking. And that's important. To provide a source of conflict, it's not enough for an NPC to have no reason to help. They have to have an actual reason to not want to help.

The reasons why an NPC might refuse to help are called **objections**. An NPC might have one objection or several. The king might not want to send his guards because he doesn't believe the empire will attack. Or because he doesn't want to weaken the defense of the capital. Or he might be afraid of an attack from the orc tribes to the west thanks to a rumor imperial spies started.

And an NPC might also have a reason to want to help as well. They just aren't strong enough to outweigh their objections. Those are called **incentives**. The king might actually be inclined to trust the heroes because they saved his pet dragon from an evil princess. And, of course, he might feel strongly about his duty to protect the kingdom.

Knowing an NPCs objections and incentives gives you an easy way to decide whether a social inter-action could succeed and whether it could fail. Basically, if the action overcomes or counters an objection, the action could work. Or if the action strengthens an incentive, it could work. Or if the action provides a good, new incentive, it could work. Provided the incentive is of interest to NPCs.

So, the PCs plead with the king to send soldiers to reinforce the pass. If the king trusts the PCs already and if his only objection is that he doubts the empire really will attack, such a plea might work. It appeals to his trust for the PCs and whittles away at his doubts. But if he's afraid of an orcish invasion and doesn't want to weaken the capital and he doesn't know the PCs from Adam, pleading isn't going to do much good. A plea alone just can't succeed.

It's even possible for the PCs to take social inter-actions that can't fail. For example, if the hostage taker wants a thousand gold pieces and an escape route and the PCs hand him a thousand gold pieces and escort him to the back door, problem solved, hostages released. No roll needed. Assuming the PCs actually hand over the coins, toss down their weapons, and hold the door for him. If they just make some promises and cross their fingers behind their backs, that could fail.

Playacting the Outcome

Depending on how you adjudicate the situation, you might need to use the rules and roll the dice, or you might just be able to decide how things play out. It doesn't matter. Either way, you've got to describe the results. And, since the results are coming from an NPC, that means it's time to play the role. Respond to the PCs using the Four P's: Personality, Posture, Pause, and Pfidget. And if the scene or encounter isn't over, do the narration thing. Invite the PCs to act again and see how things play out. Just remember that social inter-actions, like most actions, are best resolved with a single die

roll unless you're trying to make a big, complicated encounter out of them.

Living with the Consequences

Social inter-actions — like all other actions — might have consequences. In fact, they should have consequences. NPCs remember how they were treated. And important NPCs tend to come up in the story again and again. If the PCs were friendly and polite, the NPC should remember that. Future interactions should start off on a friendlier footing. The NPC might have an incentive to help the PCs in the future. You can even give the PCs a mechanical bonus on future social inter-actions using the guidelines that are coming in **Chapter 15**.

Likewise, if the characters were a bunch of jerks, the NPC should remember that too. If they were rude or bullying or threatening, the NPC probably won't like them very much. The NPC might have a strong objection to helping the NPCs in the future. And you might impose penalties on future social inter-actions. NPCs with clout — like kings and wizards and villains — might even bring other consequences to bear against the PCs. They might try to have the PCs arrested or curse them or send minions to attack them. It'll depend on the resources the NPC has at their disposal and their disposition. In other words, think about the situation and the NPC and make the decision they'd make. Role-play them.

When One Social Inter-Action Isn't Enough

Although one die roll is usually enough for any action, even a social inter-action, sometimes you want to build a more complex social encounter. One that requires a bit more give-and-take, back-and-forth conversation. Fortunately, you can pull that off pretty easily using a variation of the ten-point scale I mentioned back in **Chapter 10** to give the encounter some structure. You just have to know the NPCs objections and incentives.

Start by spelling out each of the NPCs objections and give them a score from one to ten. A ten means a really powerful objection. A one means a niggling little doubt. Then list any existing incentives the NPC might have to help and score them as well. A ten means a really powerful urge to help. It should look something like this:

Objections

Doesn't believe the Empire will attack: 5
Afraid of imminent attack by Orc tribes: 7

Incentives

Trusts the heroes: 3
Duty to defend the people of his kingdom: 4

Now, as long as there isn't at least one incentive to help which has a score higher than the highest scored objection, the NPC won't help. If a single incentive's score ever exceeds the score of the highest objection, the NPC will give in. Simple, right?

Each time the heroes take a social inter-action, decide whether that action will reduce an objection, bolster an incentive, or create a new incentive. Basically, adjudicate the action. If the action is a success, shift the scores appropriately. You can decide how much the scores change based on the actions.

How do you know when the encounter is over? Well, there's two different methods you can use. You can even combine both. That's what I usually do. First, when the PCs fail a social inter-action, you can adjust the scores in the other direction. If they screw up decreasing an objection, it can actually strengthen the NPC's resolve and increase that objection. You can also adjust the scores against the PCs if they do or say something really dumb. Like if Argylefraster admits that the heroes have heard the same rumors about the orcs and the king has a valid reason to be afraid of them. That's just counterproductive.

If any objection ever reaches 10 or if all the NPCs incentives to help drop to 0, the encounter is a failure. Narrate the PCs out. They're done. They'll have to try something else.

The second method is to give an NPC a score to reflect how long they will put up with this crap. I call it a patience score. Give it a score between 1 and 10, with 10 meaning the patience of a saint. Each time the PCs fail at an action or say something stupid or pointless, the NPC's patience score drops by 1. When it hits 0, the NPC is done putting up with this garbage. Scene over. Get the hook.

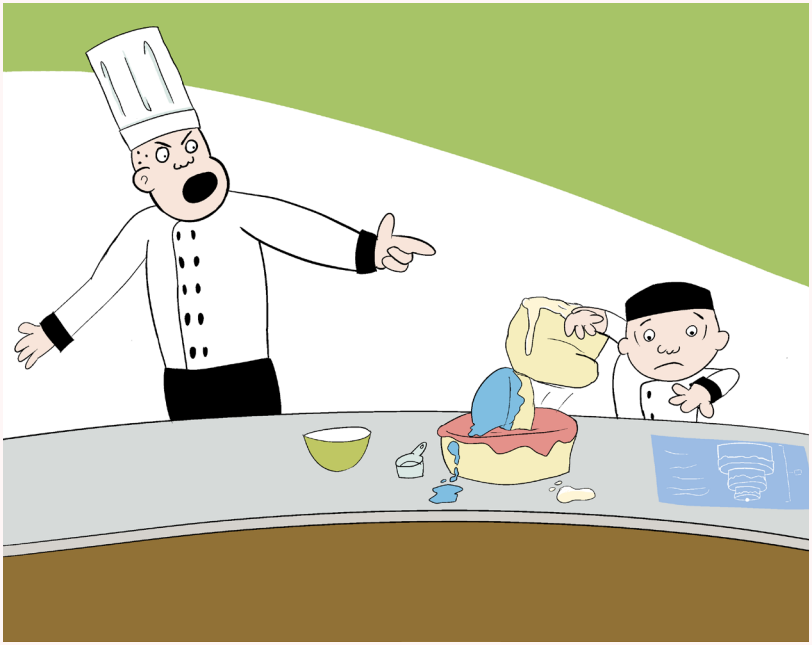
Using this system, you can easily create complex social interaction encounters. Especially if you also provide liberal bonuses and penalties when the PCs say just the right or just the wrong thing. You can even give the NPCs biases, prejudices, or other traits the PCs can appeal to. Or that they have to avoid. The king might be prone to flattery so any action that flatters the King gets a bonus. **Chapter 15** provides some good guidelines for improvising appropriate bonuses and penalties. You can even plant the equivalent of social traps. The king might not like being threatened or bossed around. Any character that gets too pushy will always fail. That might even end the whole encounter unless the PCs apologize convincingly.

As you play out the encounter, use those objections and incentives to guide what the NPC says. If the PCs are stuck going in circles, have the king bring up the orc tribes or express his doubts about the empire. That's just another form of inviting the PCs to act. It's showing them an action they can take. And if the PCs spend

some time feeling out the NPC and listening to his concerns — and the game you're running has some sort of empathy or insight skill — you can outright reveal an objective or incentive or some other trait. And you can adjudicate charm spells and mind-reading spells within this framework as well.

Chapter 13:

A Bunch of Narrative B.S.



An RPG is more than just a string of actions and die rolls. It's more than just a string of scenes and encounters. An RPG is an adventure story. The heroes have goals, they make choices, they succeed or fail based on those choices, and they deal with the consequences. That's why there's an R and P before the G.

Now, some GMs — especially voice actors and YouTubers who think that subscription counts mean anything — get really hung up on that story thing. In fact, a lot of GMs describe RPGs as "collaborative, interactive storytelling experiences." And then those GMs give useless advice like "the story is important; tell a good story" and "don't let the rules get in the way of a good story." What a load of bull.

Here's the truth: the story is important. A good game is a good story. But, any advice to do with story is worthless. Never trust a GM who talks about story.

Meaningless Story

Imagine you sign up for a baking class from some master chef from some European country. Class starts. "The point of a cake," says the chef in some almost incomprehensible accent, "is that it tastes good. Cake tastes good. When you make a cake, make it taste good. Also, it should be fluffy. Okay, now you try. Make a cake. You have one hour."

You'd walk out. And, if you were me, you'd punch the chef on the way out. Yes, what he said is true. But it's also useless. It tells you nothing about how to make a cake. That's because you can't just make something fluffy and yummy. What you do is mix the right ingredients in the right proportions and bake the whole thing at the right temperature for the right amount of time and them something yummy and fluffy comes out. Then you decorate it with icing and stuff.

A story is like a cake. Stories can be good. And they can be bad. But authors don't just make stories good. They take a setting, add some characters, stir in a plot, sprinkle in some themes, and bake the whole thing for thirty minutes on 350 degrees. I think that's the editing part.

That's why you can't trust any storyteller who talks about story like it's just a thing you do. Just a thing you make. Real storytellers — real GMs — understand that stories have ingredients. They have settings, plots, and characters. They have tone. They have tension. They have pacing. As a GM, if you want to tell a good story, you have to understand how a story actually fits together.

See, you have a big disadvantage as a GM. Authors and screenwriters can take their time. They can revise and edit their stories. They can tweak them until they're just right. And they have complete control over their characters. But you? Well, you're assembling your story one scene at a time as its unfolding. And the heroes have minds of their own. You can't control them. You can only react to them. It's like trying to bake a good cake while people are already eating it and the eggs and the flour keep arguing with each other about which bowl they should be in.

Plotting a Good Foundation

Apart from the main characters — which you have no control over in your game's story — the biggest, most important element of any story is the plot. It's basically the flour. It provides the structure for the whole thing. It gives the story it's shape and texture.

Now, people often get the plot confused with the story itself. The story is everything. It's the whole cake. The whole game. The whole movie, beginning to end. It's the plot and the characters and the setting and the themes and the tone and all that other Literature

101 crap you learned in that one required humanities course at college. The plot is the sequence of events. It's the things that happen to the character in the story as they make their way from the beginning to the end.

Now, the plot provides the structure for the story. But pretty much every plot is structured in exactly the same way. Here's every story ever:

> *Everything was perfectly normal. Then something happened. Things kept getting worse until it seemed like they were going to explode. Then something big happened. The problem was resolved, and everything went back to normal. The end.*

That's every movie you've ever seen and every book you've ever read. It's every story you've ever told about every crazy thing that ever happened to you. Like that time you discovered you were out of milk. So, you went to the store. Then, as you were standing in the checkout line, waiting to pay, this crazy lady in front of you starts being crazy. She keeps getting crazier and crazier. You couldn't believe how crazy she was. Then, she got so crazy that security had to come escort her away. Finally, you were able to pay for your milk and come home.

That structure is so ingrained in your brain that it shapes every story you tell about your life. So much so that you don't even realize it's a thing. You think it's just the way things are because that's how your brain works. You only really notice the structure when someone crazy tries to break it. Like David Lynch or Stanley Kubrick or whoever did that *Magnolia* movie back in the nineties. When that happens, you know something weird is happening, but you can't say exactly what's wrong. And you're not sure if you like it.

If you want your players to enjoy your game as a story — and you should — it has to conform to the proper structure. And as simple as that structure might seem, there's a little more to it than just "once upon a time everything was fine, then something happened, then everything was fine again." Fortunately, there's not too much more. Just enough to really trip you up if you're not careful.

The Beginning of the End

Every story starts with an event that kicks things into motion. Goblins attack the village. Or a Hellmouth opens under the Jones Family Manure Farm. Or you discover you're out of milk when you go to make your morning coffee. Before that moment, everything is fine. Everything is normal. After that moment, though, well, someone has to do something.

That first event might be called the **hook** or the **incitement** or the **call to action**. It doesn't matter what it's called. What matters

is that it provides a goal to pursue or a problem to solve. And it usually implies a good reason to want to pursue the goal or solve the problem. Stop the goblins from attacking the village. Why? Because we live in the village. It's where we keep all of our friends and families and stuff. Close the Hellmouth. Why? Because it's going to spread flaming sulfur and brimstone and cow plops all over everything if we don't. Get milk. Why? Because we will literally die without our morning coffee.

The beginning of the story — the incitement — does more than kick the story into motion though. It also shows what the end of the story is probably going to look like. It sets up the resolution. At least in the broad strokes. If the goblins are attacking the village at the beginning of the story, they must have been stopped by the end of the story. Or the village must have been destroyed. The goblins might be killed. They might be driven off. The village might make peace with the goblins and celebrate a big, joint Goblin Cherry Pie Festival. Somehow, in some way, the goblins won't be attacking the village anymore at the end of the story.

Now, an RPG adventure provides what we call a **complete story**. That is, it has a beginning — a call to action — and it has a resolution — an ending. That's probably not surprising. Because an RPG adventure is also a game. Which means it needs a goal. And everyone has to understand the goal. And the game is over when the players accomplish the goal. Or suffer some sort of final failure.

Scenes and encounters also tell stories. They have goals. And they end when the goal is accomplished. Or lost. But they don't work as complete stories because they don't make sense without the adventure around them. A battle isn't an interesting story by itself. You have to know why the sides are fighting and what's at stake. The story — the adventure — provides that information.

None of this should count as a shocking revelation. I'm just covering the same ground I covered in **Chapter 9** in a new way. But then, that's GMing for you. Game mastering is doing the same thing over and over but calling it something different every time.

That said, the beginning and ending only provide the anchor points for the plot. The real meat of the plot happens in the middle. And a well-structured plot is more than just a series of scenes strung between the beginning and ending.

Pointing Out the Plot

After the incitement, a bunch of stuff happens, and then the heroes resolve the big problem, right? That's the plot. Well, yes, that's true. But it isn't all. A story that's just a string of events is just an obstacle course. Good stories don't just march forward inexorably toward their conclusion.

A **plot point** — sometimes called a turning point or a reversal — is a big event that somehow changes the story. It might send the heroes in a new direction, or it might provide a major setback, or it might reveal that there's more to the story than anyone originally thought. Plot points are the big moments.

When the heroes capture a goblin commando during the attack on the village and the commando reveals that the goblins are massing in the forest and planning to burn down the entire village as part of their Goblin Cherry Pie Jubilee, that's a plot point. When the PCs close the Hellmouth beneath Jones' Manure Farm and suddenly two more open up on neighboring farms, that's a plot point. And when you're just about to pay for your milk when the crazy lady starts being crazy, that's a plot point.

Now, plot points usually define the beginnings or ends of major scenes. But not every scene is a plot point. Some scenes are less important than others. The heroes might have numerous encounters with goblin raiders as they try to protect the village during the initial attack. They're just trying to get things under control. Dealing with problems. Basically, they are just moving vaguely forward in the story. But when they defeat the last group of raiders and capture that commando, that scene ends with a revelation that changes everything and sends the heroes scrambling in a new direction. That scene is an actual plot point.

As a GM, you can't really control the plot of an RPG adventure. You never know what the players are going to do. Because they have agency, bless their stupid hearts. The best thing you can do is provide a good motivation — a good incitement — and point them toward a goal. If they follow the path you expect, great. You're ready for that. If not, you have to scramble along behind them reacting to their insanity.

But you can control the plot points. You can plan the big moments that send the heroes spinning vaguely in the right direction. Or some new direction. It's kind of like dropping bumpers in front of a pinball to send the ball ricocheting in a new direction. When the heroes discover the goblins are massing for a bigger attack, hopefully they will go shooting off after them. When the new Hellmouths open, the players will realize something bigger is going on and start investigating.

When you start running an adventure — or when you write your own — you want to identify the incitement, the goal, and the plot points. That way, you have a rough idea of where the story and the game are going to go. And if they start to go in some crazy direction, at least you know what major turning points you have to fling in your player's path to make sure the story and the game still work.

Building to a Climax

Now, plots don't merely ricochet from event to event until they are over. And not all plot points are created equally. Stories and plot tend to build up over time. Basically, each plot point tends to be bigger than the last. I'll explain what bigger actually means in a bit. For now, I'm just going to say bigger. We call that **rising action**. And eventually, the plot reaches its biggest, highest point. And that point — the point of highest excitement — is called the **climax**. It's the fight with the Archdevil that's opening all the Hellmouths. It's the pie-eating contest with the goblin champion that will determine the fate of the village. It's when the crazy lady throws a punch at the cashier and security has to tackle her and drag her away.

Every story has a climax. And every story will be judged on its climax. If you don't plan a good climax, then your story is going to be judged by whatever the last big thing to happen in it was. And that can be a problem because a climax resolves the story. It pays off on whatever started the whole mess. Or, at least, it gets out of the way. Once the Archdevil is exorcised, the Hellmouths stop opening up. Problem solved. After the pie-eating contest, the goblins give up their plans to sacrifice the village. After the crazy lady is dragged away, you can pay for your milk and go home.

The thing is, you can screw that up. It might not seem possible, but it is. Imagine if the heroes go to the goblin village and the chief just says, "well, okay, since you asked nicely, we won't attack." And the heroes head home. On the way, they are attacked by a giant forest dragon and have an epic fight. Then they finish going home. That'd be weird, right? The initial problem was resolved and then a completely unrelated climax came right the heck out of nowhere. That sort of crap can ruin a good story.

Resolving and Falling

After the climax — assuming you don't screw it up — the initial problem that started the whole story should be resolved without further incident. Either the climax fixes the problem or else there's nothing else preventing the problem from being fixed. The pie-eating contest ends the goblin's aggression. After the crazy lady is dragged away, you can pay for your milk and go home without further incident.

But, in an RPG, the heroes aren't guaranteed a happy ending. They have agency. And that means they can screw everything up. Which is what makes RPGs hilarious sometimes. The story still has to be resolved though. And that resolution has to follow from the beginning. It's just not the resolution the players were hoping for. The goblins burn the village down and kill everyone. Fire and brimstone and manure are spread all over and the region is now

a suburb of the City of Dis with a Highway to Hell running right through it. Or your milk carton was smashed as the crazy lady was dragged away, the store didn't have any more, and you had to find a way to survive a coffee-free day.

Once the story is resolved, though, you can't just turn to the players and say "okay, you won, get out." There's always a little bit more to the story after the resolution. But not too much. That's called the **falling action** or *dénouement*. It's just a short chunk of story that shows the heroes returning to normal. Or dealing with whatever the new normal is as a result of the story. They return to the village, stuffed with goblin cherry pies, and the thronging masses shower them with gratitude. Or they grab a bunch of asbestos brooms and start cleaning the flaming cow patties along the center median of the new highway that was built where their house used to be.

And, of course, whatever passes for the new normal will be disrupted by a new incitement next week. There will be a new adventure. A new story. Such is the life of an adventurer.

Plot Points as Nesting Dolls

A good story starts with an incitement, goes through a series of plot points that provide rising action, top out at a climax, then end with a resolution and a *dénouement*. That's how stories fit together. And how adventures fit together. But I'm going to let you in on a big secret that will help you really take control of your adventures and campaigns.

Scenes and encounters and even individual actions follow basically the same structure. In miniature. They aren't complete stories, mind you, but they have the same basic shape. And plot points provide the beginnings or ends of major scenes and encounters, right? So, what?

So, you can plan an adventure by planning the incitement, the resolution, the climax, and then coming up with the list of plot points. As you need them, you can expand the plot points into scenes. And if you want to modify an existing adventure, you can just add a new plot point and expand it into a new scene. Or you can remove a scene that's not a plot point scene. Or change a plot point scene completely. It can either provide the same plot point in the end, or it can send the adventure spinning in a new direction.

What about a campaign? As I explained in **Chapter 9**, a campaign is a series of loosely connected adventures, right? Well, it turns out that campaigns are stories too. And many of the adventures in a campaign begin and end with a plot point. Thus, if you want to plan a campaign, you can start with a list of plot points and then expand each into an adventure.

But that's not all.

Threading Your Plots

Have you ever noticed that most television shows and some movies and pretty much all books seem to have multiple stories going on at once? No. No, you haven't. Because you're smart enough now to know that those movies and shows and books are each one story. But they have multiple plots. And if you didn't realize that, go sit in the corner and think about what you've done. Then reread the beginning of the chapter. I am very disappointed in you.

Most TV shows, for example, have a main plot that involves most of the characters resolving some issue. But occasionally, they switch to a secondary group of characters resolving some smaller issue. They switch back and forth between those groups, between those plots, until both are resolved. And the plots themselves are pretty independent of each other. They call that an A-Plot, B-Plot setup.

There's reason why they do that. Mostly, it's because focusing on one story for too long can get boring unless the story is complicated and twisty. And following a complicated, twisty story can get tiring. So, they split the difference by weaving two simple plots together and flipping back and forth.

That structure actually works really well for RPGs. Complicated, twisty plots are hard to follow from the inside, which is essentially what the players are trying to do when they play the game. And they can get even harder to follow when you have to break them into chunks and play them out over several weeks. Weaving two— or more — simple plots together helps keep the game simple without making it boring. And it also helps ensure the game can appeal to all of the players. After all, different players enjoy different plots. So, opening two plot lines means the players spend less time waiting around for a plot they can really sink their teeth into.

To pull off that whole interweaving thing, all you have to do is recognize that a plot is basically just a thread. Which is what we call individual, interwoven plots that make up a larger story. They are called plot threads. Or sometimes plot arcs.

Imagine if you take the incitement, all of the plot points, the climax, and *dénouement* from a single plot and string them like beads onto a thread. That's a plot thread. If you have two or three of those, you can twist them together and then just bounce back and forth between the threads. First you advance this plot, then that one, back and forth, until you're done.

It's as simple as that. There's only one thing to watch out for. And that's the fact that some plots tend to feel bigger and more important than others. One plot thread will always overshadow another. Its unavoidable. So, you want to identify the bigger and smaller plots and make sure the bigger one really is bigger. That's why they're called an A-Plot and a B-Plot. Now, because one plot

is bigger than another, one climax is also bigger than another. The bigger plot has the bigger climax. So, you want to make sure that the biggest climax is the last thing to happen in your game. In other words, make sure your B-Plot has its climax and gets resolved before your A-Plot climax happens.

Now, you can not only fiddle with the scenes in a published adventure or plan your own adventure, you can weave whole extra stories into a published adventure. Want to add a side quest or B-plot or personal story about one of the heroes? Just build a plot thread as a series of plot points — with an incitement, a climax, and a resolution, of course — and interweave that with the plot points in the existing story.

Thus, with a keen understanding of plot points and plot thread, you can make sure your game feels like a nice, satisfying story, no matter what crazy things the players do and whatever personal weirdness you decide to add. As long as you pace yourself.

Pacing Yourself

Stories aren't exciting because of their plots. Stories are exciting because we're not sure how they're going to turn out. This is true even if it's some Disney movie and we know the good guys are going to win and the bad guys are going to die in some accident that wasn't directly caused by the good guys so the good guys don't actually have to get their hands dirty.

Even if we know the good guys are going to win, we're not sure how they're going to win. And what it will cost them to win. And in an RPG, we can't even be sure the good guys will win. They usually do, but players are really good at screwing things up.

The point is that stories contain a lot of uncertainty. That's what keeps people interested from moment to moment. A good structure ensures we have a good opinion of the story or game after it's over. And that means we'll want to play more games. But it's that uncertainty that keeps us interested during the story.

Dramatic tension is the name for the amount of uncertainty in a story at any given moment. And, in a good story, tension rises over time. When we say the story is building to a climax? Well, tension is what we're talking about. And when we say some plots and some plot points are bigger than others? Well, that's tension too.

The climax of a story always comes at the point of highest tension. That's why something terrible usually happens to the heroes right before their last confrontation with the villain. The heroes are scattered, or they've gotten beaten up badly, or they've been forced into hiding. They're at their worst. Victory seems unlikely. How are they going to pull this off?

Alternatively, right before the climax, something might happen to raise the stakes. Whatever was at stake before, now it's worse. The villain isn't just planning to blow up Dayton, he's also kidnapped the heroes' mothers and has strapped them all to the bomb. Not only have the heroes fallen into a trap, but the Empire's super weapon is actually fully operational. You aren't just out of milk, there's been a recall. There's a milk shortage everywhere. There won't be any milk for weeks if you don't find some today.

When uncertainty increases or when the stakes are raised, the overall level of tension in the story increases. That is, the people watching the story — or playing the game — become more tense. They're more interested, more excited, and more nervous about the outcome.

But tension tires you out. You can't sit on the edge of your seat for too long. It wears you out. So even though tension is constantly rising toward the climax, that's just an overall trend. Moment to moment, tension rises and falls. It goes up and down. It has to. Low tension moments give the audience a break. High tension moments get their blood pumping. Dramatic revelations and sudden betrayals, they push the tension higher. Slow moments, romantic moments, comedic moments, they relieve the tension.

Keep Them Tense, But Not Too Tense

As a GM, you have to manage the tension level in your game. You want it to grow as the game goes on. And as the session goes on. But you don't want to keep it too high for too long. Otherwise, you'll exhaust the players. But let it stay too low for too long and they'll get bored. How do you know how tense the game is? You watch your players.

When tension is low, the players will be less engaged. They'll sit back in their chairs. They'll talk slower. They'll take their time. They might even get bored or distracted. If they are making little towers out of their dice, tension is too low. When tension is high, the players will be excited. They'll lean forward. They'll talk fast. They'll be excited. Rushed. Focused. But when they start to get frazzled and stressed, when they look strung out, tension is too high.

In general, when tension is low, you want to raise it. And when tension is high, you want to relieve it. Plot points, action scenes, and major setbacks all increase tension. Slow scenes, positive developments, non-confrontational social interactions, bookkeeping, discovering treasure, those things relieve tension. It's as simple as that. More or less. You want to keep bouncing between high tension and low to keep the players engaged but not strung out. It takes a fine hand. And practice. Like everything.

There is one exception to the rule about lowering tension when it's high and raising tension when it's low. The climax should always come at the moment of highest tension. Right before the climax of your adventure, you want the players as close to strung out as you can get them. Now, it can be dangerous to push them there. You can break your players if you push this tension thing too hard. You don't want to reduce them to gibbering vegetables. But what you absolutely don't want to do is to go into your climax when the tension is low. If the players are relaxed, slouching, and distracted, do not go into the climax. Find some way to increase tension first. Then go into your climax. Attack them with something. Throw a dragon at them. Or just start screaming and acting crazy. That'll make them tense.

Admittedly, this tension thing requires you to futz around with the adventure. And if you're running a published adventure, you may not be able to shift things around on the fly. In theory, if the adventure is written well, you shouldn't have to shift things on the fly. But if published RPG products were written well, I wouldn't have had to write this book. So, take that for what it's worth. Published adventures are a crap shoot.

Just watch your players and juggle things as best you can. If you're brave enough to modify published adventures and you've identified the plot points before you started running the thing, you've got the power. Don't be afraid to use it.

And when you plan your own adventures, keep this tension thing in mind.

Running Fast and Running Slow

Tension flavors a scene. You can have a high-tension scene — one with high stakes and a lot of uncertainty — and a low-tension scene — one with low stakes and a fairly sure outcome. But tension is only half the flavor of a scene. Because you can also have fast scenes and slow scenes. A fast scene is one with a lot of action, one in which the players don't have a lot of time to think. They just have to act. A slow scene is a scene in which the players can take their time and think things through.

Battles and chases are fast, high-tension scenes. Hostage negotiations are slow, high-tension scenes. A romantic scene or quiet conversation is a low-tension, slow scene. And a friendly dance contest at the local bar is a fast, low-tension scene.

The trick to pacing your game well — to managing the speed and tension of the game — is varying the types of scenes you run. Build tension a bit, bleed it off. Speed the game up, then slow it down. Go from a fast, low-tension scene to a fast, high-tension scene, then to

a slow, low-tension scene. Never use the same speed and tension twice in a row.

In the meanwhile, watch your players. If they're starting to relax, pick up the pace. If they are getting too worked up, slow down the pace. If the game has been moving fast, slow it down and give them time to think. And if things are going too slow, speed it up.

If you control the pace of your game, make sure that tension is trending upwards, and finish with a good climax, your game will be worthy of an Oscar. At least as worthy as any of the shlock they've been giving Oscars to lately.

Man, Hollywood is turning out a lot of garbage these days.

Chapter 14:

A Bunch More Narrative B.S.

Have I mentioned that an RPG is more than just a string of actions and die rolls? I think I have. And I think I've already mentioned that your job, as a GM, is to run a good game that also presents a good story. And, as I pointed out in **Chapter 13**, that comes down to making sure the events in your story line up with what human brains have evolved over 50,000 years to expect out of a story. Yeah. Evolved to expect. Seriously. The latest steaming pile of cinema set in the *Marvel Universe* is actually the result of fifty millennia of human evolution. The same process that has given us the opposable thumb, language, and — fittingly — cancer.

If you understand the basic elements of story structure and can keep your hands on the pacing reigns, you can provide your players with a pretty satisfying story experience alongside their game. The problem is that a story is like a porcelain Russian nesting doll. Wait, I've used that before, haven't I? Okay. Hold on. The problem is that a story is like one of those delicate, gem-encrusted egg sculpture things created by that Russian for Tsar Nicholas Rasputin or

whatever. You know what I mean. Fabier Mache Eggs? I don't know. Look it up on Wikipedia. The story of your game is a like priceless, gem-encrusted Russian sculpture of an egg. It's pretty to look at, but it's ridiculously delicate. If you drop one of those suckers while you're visiting, hypothetically, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, pieces are going to go everywhere. And you'd better run. Because their security is pretty top-notch.

Stories are delicate. That's what I'm saying. They break easily. And you usually can't put them back together once they break. Meanwhile, your players are like me in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They're clumsy, careless, unimpressed by your work, and likely to get banned for life. So, your job is to run along behind your players while they barge around the story of your game and catch all the delicate works of carefully crafted art that they knock over. In short, your job is to protect the story from your players.

I don't mean to imply players are malicious. They aren't. They are just careless and clumsy. They like good stories the way I like rare antiquities and priceless works of art. But accidents happen. And a GM has to see those accidents coming to prevent them.

A Carefully Sculpted Illusion

Have you ever been watching a perfectly good movie when something so crazy stupid happens that you just have to turn it off? Maybe a character protects himself from an atomic bomb by climbing inside a fridge? And the refrigerator is hurled thousands of feet by the nuclear explosion before it bounces to a stop on the rocky desert ground? And then the character pops out like nothing happened? Something like that?

What a load of bull. Everyone knows you can't get out of a fridge if you lock yourself inside. That's why they tell you to take the door off a refrigerator if you leave it out for trash pickup. How did Indiana Jones get the door open from the inside? What a terrible movie.

Look: whether you hate *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* or you have a wrong, stupid opinion, you have to acknowledge that a lot of people had a problem with that fridge thing. Many people held it up as the moment when the movie was ruined. And that's a little crazy. After all, Indiana Jones once saved himself from an airplane crash by launching himself in a rubber raft down the side of the Himalayan Freaking Mountains. And we're talking about a film series where magic rocks let evil cultists pull people's hearts out without killing them. And where God Himself will blast a bunch of Nazis to death with lightning for going through His luggage, but He won't just smite Adolf Hitler when he's standing right there!

Also, psychic Russians and aliens.

Before I go any further, you have to understand something. As a GM, you have to get this. Really, every creative person should have it etched into the wall above their writing desk. There is no point in arguing whether someone is right or wrong about what they like and don't like. None. People like what they like. They don't like what they don't like. Logic doesn't enter into it. Even if you think it does. Your brain decides what you like first. Based on emotion. And then, afterwards, the rest of their brain tries to figure out why. That was proven and you can look it up in the scientific journal of *This is a Book About a Game About Pretend Elves Not a Doctoral Thesis, Go Find Your Own Citations*. I think it was the July 2018 issue.

All the logic in the world won't make someone like what they don't like. It won't make someone not like what they do like. Any creator who argues that their audience is bad or wrong or stupid for not liking something ends up with no fans. That goes for Lucasfilm and it goes for you, Mr. or Mrs. GM.

I bring it up because realism — which is what I'm talking about — is a very personal thing. I want you to understand it, so you can run less worse games. But I know some of you — and you know who you are — are going to want to argue about logic and realism. And there's no point.

What Could Be Real

When something like that fridge thing happens, some people stand up and scream, "that's not realistic!" Then, a bunch of other people scream, "the movie has psychic Russians fighting over a magical alien skull; it's not meant to be realistic." Then people start throwing punches. Because people are stupid.

The thing is, this has nothing to do with realism. It's just that people don't know the right word to use. The word is **verisimilitude**. It means that something isn't meant to be realistic, but if you accept certain specific possibilities, the rest *could* be real. If you accept Russian psychics and magical alien skulls, then *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* could totally be real. It has a semblance of reality, except for the specifically unrealistic parts.

This all relies on something liberal arts majors call the **willing suspension of disbelief** while they're on their lunch breaks at the Department of Motor Vehicles discussing narrative meta-theory or whatever. When someone writes a movie or a book or a game, they're cutting a deal with their audience. And it goes like this: "if you let me get away with certain, specific unrealistic things, I'll tell you a really good story." And that's it. That's the willing suspension of disbelief. The audience agrees to accept certain things as "totally possible" even though they're not in return for a good story.

Suspension of disbelief is extremely delicate. And everyone has their own line between "okay, I'll buy that" and "are you freaking kidding me?!" And once something crosses that line for you, you start to notice all the flaws. And everything has flaws. You just don't notice the flaws in the good stuff. In fact, the better a book or movie or game is, the more slack people cut it. Look at Pixar's *Up*. That movie was so full of heart and soul and charm that you totally accepted talking dog collars and the fact that the house didn't just rip itself free from the radiator and plummet to the ground while the mass of balloons floated off to choke the cast of *Finding Nemo*. Meanwhile, *Indy and the Skull* was just kind of bland. So, everyone noticed every little wrong thing with that pile of schlock.

And even if a story is really engaging, it still has to follow its own rules. I used to be a fan of this show called *The Glades*. It was about a rough, Chicago cop who moved down to the swampy rural backwater of the Florida Everglades. It was a reasonably good fish-out-of-water procedural crime drama. Crimes happened, crimes got solved by devil-may-care detective, culture shock hilarity occasionally ensued. And then, sometime in the second season, there was an episode in which a literal ghost literally helped solve the plot. Unambiguously. I mean, you didn't see it or anything. But the story made it clear. The ghost helped the cop. And I was done. Good bye, *The Glades*. You broke the rules.

Incidentally, my mother didn't care about that at all. She kept watching. But she's more open to possible existence of ghosts than I am in in general. To her, ghosts are one of those "who knows? They could be real" things that might be part of reality.

It's all very delicate and complicated and personal. Suspension of disbelief varies from person to person and it varies by genre and tone and by how good a thing is to begin with. It's totally irrational, it's pointless to argue over, and if you don't respect it, it may ruin the game for you or your players.

Fixing Broken Belief

So, you have this completely irrational, highly subjective criteria on which everyone is judging your game and which you can accidentally break without warning simply by allowing one action that seems perfectly reasonable to you in a world of magical dragons and petty gods. And what the hell are you supposed to do about that?!

Honestly, there's really only a few things you can do. Be consistent, trust your gut, and don't try to fight about it. Consistency is one of the vital hearts of the game. Remember **Chapter 9**? Yeah. Consistency doesn't just tell people what to expect with regards to the rules, it also tells them what to expect with regards to how the world works. If you suddenly decide that your swords-and-sorcery

medieval feudal world has one inexplicably, technologically advanced kingdom, you're messing with the suspenders in the disbelief system. You can't just change the rules suddenly. Either make sure something like that is there from the beginning or else gradually introduce it. Start with small technological elements first. Maybe there's a gnome selling clockwork toys at a fair. If the players are okay with that, let them see one of those zeppelin airships flying overhead a few weeks later. If that doesn't cause a stir, you can add Steampunkistan.

And if your players balk at anything? Or laugh? Or scoff? Or question it? Back off. Don't argue. Don't justify. Because if you break their suspension of disbelief, they're going to stop having fun.

And don't let anything break your suspension of disbelief either. If a player tries to do some ludicrously impossible thing — like hiding from a nuclear explosion in a fridge — don't feel like you have to accept it. Your suspension of disbelief is also important. In fact, it's more important. Your brain is the one that imagines the whole game world into existence. You're the load bearing brain at the table. If it goes down, the whole game goes with it. That's why fireballs don't work underwater in my game world. Not because of rules or logic. But because that just seems crazy to me. In my gut.

Tone Deaf Gaming

Every group has that one player who always insists on playing weird, wacky characters. Gnome bard pranksters, halfling kleptomaniacs, and comically cowardly fighters. And the one time that player actually plays a normal character, he names it "Buttz Awesomelaser." That player isn't just annoying, he's ruining the fictional world.

There's this thing called tone, right? It's the overall mood of the story or book or movie or game. A game can be serious or silly. It can be optimistic or grim. It can be epic. It can be fantastic. It can be gritty. Basically, tone tells you what emotions you're supposed to be feeling when you play the game. Or watch the movie. Or read the book. Whatever.

Tone is a pretty delicate thing. Mainly because it's playing with people's emotions. While tone varies throughout a piece, it can't swing too far. It can't go from one extreme to another. That's why there weren't any wacky song and dance numbers in *The Lord of the Rings* movies. Those were serious, epic, adventure movies about a bunch of innocent schlubs who were saddled with fighting off the corrupting influence of pure evil long enough to throw a bit of jewelry in a volcano to kill Satan. And even though they survived and returned home, they were each scarred in their own way and they could never really go home again.

That was completely different from *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*. That did have a wacky song and dance number because it

was a lighthearted, fun story about a group of dwarven exiles whose homeland had been destroyed and who were left wandering the world searching for a way to restore their pride and their honor while a council of the smartest people in the world realized that a purely evil, malevolent entity was spreading its evil influence over the world and one of them was secretly a traitor.

Honestly, tone was why that movie was such a mess. On the one hand, you had all of that. On the other hand, you had the song and dance number, the cartoon goblins, and the rabbit sled wizard who should have been teaching at Hogwarts.

Tone doesn't have to be fixed. It doesn't have to be completely unchanging. In fact, it has to vary a little. You can't build a whole story around one emotion. That gets dull. That's why serious movies have lighter moments and why comedies have a few serious moments. But you can't swing the tone wildly between extremes. You can't shift someone's emotional gearbox from first to third without depressing the clutch.

Tone Policing Your Game

Your game has a tone. All games do. It might be light and exciting, it might be campy swashbuckly fun, it might be heavy and grim. The thing is, you probably didn't choose your tone. It's the sort of thing that gradually develops. But, even though you didn't choose it, you do want to defend it. Because broken tone equals broken story.

You're the tone police. It's that simple. You have to decide what fits your game and what doesn't. And that means sometimes telling your players "no." Yes, it sucks to say no. But your players will appreciate it. Especially the other players. While Wackypants McClownyface might be really sad about not being able to play his gnomish jester, the rest of the players who signed up for a more serious game will be quite happy to be spared putting up with his joybuzzer handshakes and his constantly casting *Bugsby's Pull My Finger* while they are trying to save the world from Moloch the Archdevil.

The same is true about adjudicating actions. Some GMs and some groups are happy to allow every wacky, crazy, silly thing anyone can think of a chance to succeed. Not me. But some GMs. Some groups. Those GMs will say, "Sure, Sävis, Tullegrin Underhill can ride in your backpack and use his mounted combat feats as if you were her horse." And, "Sure, you absolutely can use the halfling as an improvised thrown weapon." Because their games are screwball comedies. But that doesn't mean yours has to be.

Death by Defying Genre

Finally, there's genre. People think of genres as firm, well-defined things. But they aren't. They are very loose, vague, broad, general classifications. They are basically ways of saying "all of these works of fiction over here are kind of similar in terms of their setting and tone and themes and stuff, except where they aren't." That's really what genre is. It's just putting a bunch of fictional things next to each other and saying, "these are all more similar to each other than they are to anything else." And when you break a genre like fantasy down into subgenres — epic fantasy, high fantasy, low fantasy, swords-and-sorcery fantasy, fantasy-punk, science-fantasy, erotic fantasy, and so on — you've got a vague mess.

But genres do create expectations. Because even though no one can clearly define any genre, everyone knows exactly what belongs in which genre and which things absolutely can never, ever be a part of which genre. And no two people agree on any of their lists. So, if you cross genres too heavily and some of your players actually care, you run the risk of wrecking the game for those players. Or, for yourself.

Genre conventions are the reason some people got annoyed when George Lucas decided the magical, fantastic, spiritual Force actually came from pseudo-scientific microscopic organisms. And they are why some GMs can't stand the idea of science-fiction-esque psychic powers in their swords-and-sorcery fantasy setting. And it's why I stopped watching *The Glades*.

But genre is something people care a lot less about. Some people just love genre mashups. They can't get enough of mixing Cthulhu horror with steampunk or science-fantasy with supernatural romance. That's fine. Those people are wrong. They're sick. But it's fine.

And, at this point, all I can say about genre is the same thing I said about suspension of disbelief and tone: guard genre conventions closely, tamper at your own peril, be consistent, trust your gut, feel out your players, and respect your players if their conventions are different from yours.

Chapter 15:
Ready for Anything

You might not have noticed it, but you've been suffering under a terrible paradox. All GMs do. It's so central to GMing that I call it the Game Master's Paradox. It goes like this.

> *An RPG always runs best when the GM has everything planned out in advance and has access to all of the statistics, notes, and maps necessary to run the game. But the players must have total freedom, or else it's not an RPG. And since the players' actions are completely unpredictable, it's impossible for the GM to be fully prepared for any game.*

To be fair, this paradox is precisely why the GM exists. If the GM could be fully prepared for absolutely everything, a computer could run a role-playing game. The reason the game needs a GM is because only a human brain can react, adjust, tweak, tinker, change, invent, and improvise whenever something unexpected happens.

Improvise.

Improvisation is one of the most important tools in every GM's toolbox. It's also one of the most difficult to use well. It's

poorly understood. And, to lots of GMs, it looks like a hammer and everything else looks like a nail. Lots of GMs overuse and oversell improvisation. Especially famous Internet GMs with their blogs and their YouTube videos. If they all love improvisation so much, they should just marry it already.

Improvisation is just one tool in the toolbox. And it requires a lot of skill to use it right. It can be really useful and powerful. Because if you can improvise well, you are basically prepared for anything. But it isn't always the best tool. And if you don't use it well, you usually end up more screwed than if you'd just tried to prepare things in advance.

Plan and Do, Don't Do Without a Plan

Improvisation is not the art of inventing stuff on the fly. It's not the art of running a game with nothing but a blank piece of paper in front of you. It is not the art of doing things without a plan.

Improvisation is actually the art of coming up with a plan in the moment and adjusting and adapting that plan as the situation changes. Yes, it's still doing things you weren't prepared to do. But it's not just flying by the seat of your pants. You read **Chapter 13**, right? You know that a good story needs a good structure to work. You can't just fart something out and call it a story. But what you can do is recognize you need a nice, slow-paced, tense scene to maintain the tension but slow the action down a little. And you know the adventure is all about solving the theft of the Ruby Yacht of Omnia Kareem. And you know the heroes are headed to the seedy riverfront tavern to get some information out of an informant. Maybe a tense, cutthroat game of dragon poker with the crime boss is just the ticket.

That's good improvisation. It's done with a purpose and it builds on the stuff that already exists. You're not creating something out of nothing with no plan. And that's good. Because creating something from nothing is extremely difficult. Even a single sentence like "the mystery of the stolen boat" is better than a blank piece of paper.

Don't let improvisation replace preparation. Let it fill holes. Or satisfy your occasional creative whim. Sometimes, a fun idea hits you while you're running your game. An idea for a cool scene or interesting character. Add it in. Improvisation is great for adding spice to your game. And when players go off script and exercise some of that delightful agency they love so very much, improvisation lets you keep up and act like you were ready for anything they decided to do.

The Fine Art of Narrative Improvisation

Improvisation comes in two flavors. At least when it comes to role-playing games. The first flavor is the art of narrative improvisation. Basically, that's the type of improvisation that leads to new story

elements. New scenes, new characters, new plot points, new quests, new side quests, new locations, that kind of thing. And, if you're crazy enough, improvising entire adventures counts as narrative improvisation.

Now, narrative improvisation is generally a terrible idea. Remember, stories follow structures and stories are delicate, as I discussed in **Chapters 13** and **14**. But it's also fun. You wouldn't be a GM if you didn't have a creative bone somewhere in your body. And sometimes, the urge the create just hits you. A great idea explodes into your head and you go with it. More often, though, you're improvising because you have to. The players have gone somewhere you didn't expect. They started talking to an NPC you hadn't even created. Or they've decided to take the story in a completely new direction and you need an emergency scene or three to steer them back toward a plot point that actually makes sense. Sometimes, you'll even end up improvising because you've noticed a problem in your game. Maybe you need to get the players some information you forgot to include elsewhere. Or you're trying to manage the pace of your game and need a scene to release some tension. Just because narrative improvisation is a bad idea, that doesn't mean you shouldn't do it. Just make sure you do it well.

Know What You Need

Before you start improvising new narrative bits for your game, make sure you know exactly what you need and why you need it. Don't just invent stuff. Invent stuff with a purpose. Do you need a slow scene to release tension? A fast scene to increase tension? Do you need an NPC to give the PCs some information? Do you want to add a rival character because the story is lacking a good antagonist right now? Are the players looking for information and you have a fun idea for a new location in town that might fit the bill? Know what you need before you start inventing it.

Don't Invent More than You Need

Once you know what you're trying to invent, don't create more than you need. If all you need is a rival NPC and a short introductory scene, stop at rival NPC and short introduction. Don't give the rival a gang of five friends and hangers on. Don't also invent an elaborate new location. You can always add more later. Especially outside the game. But limit what you improvise to what you actually need and flesh out the rest later.

Keep a Pile of Ideas Handy

Coming up with ideas on the fly can be hard. It can be hard to come up with new characters, new locations, new scenes, and the

like when you absolutely have to. So, get in the habit of writing down ideas whenever you have them. And I mean, away from the game table. Keep a little notebook with you and fill it with ideas for characters, locations, questions, plot points, and even names. Partly, you'll have it to refer to at the table if you need it. But mostly, you do that because, once you get into the habit of collecting ideas like that, you'll also find it's easier to summon ideas out of whatever Platonic Aether ideas come from before they end up in your brain. The more attention you give your creative ideas, the more easily your brain can spit out creative ideas when you ask it to. It's like keeping your brain lubricated. I kid you not.

If You Don't Have an Idea, Do Something

Sometimes, you'll need to improvise, and you'll find the old brain tap is running dry. You've got nothing. But the game is still going, the players are waiting, and you have to do something. Sometimes, a bathroom break can save you, but you can only use that trick so often before the players start to wonder why you take your notes with you and why half your notes are on toilet paper. When all else fails, just do something. Open your mouth and start setting a scene. Or describing a character. See what happens. The thing is, getting ideas out of your brain is like siphoning gas from your neighbor's car because you're on empty. Except less illegal. Once you get the gas flowing, it usually keeps itself going.

Which reminds me…

Go with the Flow

Once you start improvising, you'll generally find that your ideas take on a life of their own. Let them. Let the NPC develop a personality and backstory. Let the description fill itself out with interesting details. Again, this gets easier as you get used to being creative. These days, I invent most of the details about most of my major NPCs as I'm playing them. Even though that's a bad idea. But I've been doing it long enough, I know I can rely on it. And do it well.

Write Everything Down

Remember your job is to run a consistent universe. Everything you invent is becoming a part of your game world. That means you have to remember it. Because it's fact now. As you add details to your game — or immediately afterward — scribble down the notes you need to remember what you invented. And review those notes after the game. If there's any holes or missing details — because you only invented what you needed — fill them in. It's also good practice to try to connect your improvised story details to other events in your

game. The rival you invented on the fly? Maybe she used to work for the same guild that hired the heroes to do the job. Fill out the details.

Don't Wreck Your Plans

A lot of GMs give too much power to improvisation. I mentioned that before. They will gleefully discard scenes, plot points, world details, and entire adventures because they came up with some other idea on the fly. Or because their players have some crackpot theory that sounds better than the plot they invented. Don't do that. Trust your first answer. If you came up with a story or plot point or adventure or backstory or whatever while you weren't under the fierce deadline of right now, it's probably pretty good. In fact, it's probably better than whatever you invented in a two-second brain fart at the table. Keep it. Don't wreck your plans.

Unless what you came up with is really, really good. Just remember, narrative improvisation is always a bad idea.

Getting Your Hands Dirty with Mechanical Improvisation

Improvisation in role-playing games comes in two flavors. There's narrative improvisation, right? And then there's mechanical improvisation. Mechanical improvisation involves adding, tweaking, changing, or even inventing new rules and new systems. Remember that the rules are your tools and you can do whatever you want with them. If you decide your game needs a system for crafting potions or a system for resolving airborne combat between skywhale gondola ships, go to town. But, like narrative improvisation, that sort of thing is best done away from the table when you have plenty of time to think and plan.

The problem is, you generally don't discover something is missing from the rules until you need it at the table. You don't realize there's no rules for someone using a trick shot from a crossbow to take off a villain's thought-shielding helmet until Brimsor decides to take the shot so that Thaldor can use his ring of mind reading to speed up an interrogation. And you probably never noticed there's no explicit mention of what happens when you use fireball spells against underwater targets in *Dungeons & Dragons* until I mentioned it a few chapters ago. That's the sort of thing you only find out you don't have when you suddenly need it.

Most of mechanical improvisation is just about making rules calls. And that mostly comes down to adjudicating actions. Figure out the approach and the intent, use the rules to resolve the action as needed. But sometimes, you need more than just good action adjudication. Sometimes, the players will do something really clever and creative and stupid. Just how does it change the outcome when

Therrinn decides to accuse the prince of having an affair with the duke while the party is trying to negotiate their pay for their latest quest?

Inventing new rules systems is beyond the scope of this book. Sorry. I'm just teaching you how to run less worse games, not design your own. But let's run through some quick guidelines for how to handle unexpected and strange actions mechanically. Specifically, for the *d20 system*, *Pathfinder*, and *Dungeons & Dragons 5E*.

Checking Abilities and Skills

D&D, *d20*, and *Pathfinder* run on the same core mechanic. Roll a d20, add an ability modifier, add a skill or proficiency modifier, add other modifiers as appropriate, and compare the result to a DC. That's how you resolve literally any action. Everything else in all of the rules is just a specific application of that. So, if you have to deal with an unusual action, the first thing you have to do is figure out what ability modifier to use. Assuming you're following my instructions for action adjudication that I spelled out in **Chapter 10**, just look at the approach the character is taking. How are they trying to accomplish their goal? Are they relying on brute force? Physical skill and agility? Fortitude and resilience? Logic and memory? Awareness, perception, intuition, or willpower? Or confidence and social presence? That tells you what ability score to use.

Next, you decide if any particular area of training applies. Now, I'm going to tell you a secret. Even though skills are based on particular abilities in *d20*, *D&D*, and *Pathfinder*, you don't have to be married to that. If Tryss Morthos is trying to scare the Captain of the Guard by looming over him and doing muscle flexes and stuff, that's a Strength check. But it also pertains to Intimidation, which is a skill. You can use a Strength check because it's about raw muscle and add any ranks Tryss has in the Intimidation skill in *Pathfinder*, or apply a proficiency bonus if Tryss has proficiency in Intimidation in *Dungeons & Dragons*. You can mix and match skills and abilities freely whenever you think it's appropriate. That's why I'm telling you to figure out the ability score for the action first, then check the skill list.

Remember that *Pathfinder* also includes weapon training in the form of an Attack Bonus and certain combat skills as a Combat Maneuver Bonus. If Juniper is trying to impress Baron von Redd with a dazzling display of swordsmanship and showmanship, you can combine a Charisma check with Juniper's Base Attack Bonus to reflect that. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, characters receive their proficiency bonus whenever they use weapons or tools with which they are proficient. So, it works the same way.

Getting Milked for Every Bonus

Now, ability checks, skill modifiers, and proficiency bonuses are all well and good. They reflect a character's basic capabilities. But specific circumstances — including clever plans and creative use of tools — can also affect the outcome. As a GM, you are allowed to freely give the players whatever bonuses and penalties you see fit. In general, any positive circumstance in *Pathfinder* or the *d20* system is worth a +2 bonus. And any negative circumstance is worth a -2 penalty. You can use those to reward the players for their clever plans, such as using the evidence of an affair and the implication of blackmail to tip negotiations in their favor; or punish their stupid decisions, such as referring to the NPC as Baron von Sissypants during the same negotiation. If the circumstance doesn't warrant a significant bonus or penalty but you want to acknowledge it, say because Zantar's player is whining about how the action really should get a bonus considering their brilliant use of the tuba to augment their Balance check, for example, you can use a +1. I call that "throwing the whiny dog a bone." It shuts them up. And for amazing circumstances, you can increase the modifiers to +5 or -5 respectively.

In general, don't apply a bunch of different bonuses or penalties when you're doing this. Just look at the whole situation and decide whether it warrants a +2, a +5, a -2, or a -5.

Now, *Dungeons & Dragons* uses a different system for modifiers. It uses advantage and disadvantage. Advantage and disadvantage are roughly equivalent to a +5 bonus and a -5 penalty respectively. More or less. Close enough. Which is fine and all. But I find that can be two swingy and there are too many effects in *D&D* that already interact with advantage and disadvantage. So, I use +2, Advantage, -2, Disadvantage when I'm running *D&D*. You can just stick with advantage and disadvantage if you want.

Making things Difficult

Once you've determined the proper die roll to use and what bonuses and penalties to apply, you have to set the DC for the action. Assuming the player isn't rolling against another character, in which case, having the other character make an opposing check is usually the best course of action.

Dungeons & Dragons provides a nice, simple scale for DCs. A task anyone could reasonably accomplish most of the time is DC 5. A task that anyone with any amount of training or talent could do is DC 10. A task that requires both training and talent is DC 15. A tough task for the trained and talented is DC 20. You can keep going up by 5 after that. But honestly, you really only need to remember 10, 15, and 20. It's usually not worth rolling a DC 5 check. And going beyond

20 is usually too much. So, just remember Easy is DC 10, Average is DC 15, and Hard is DC 20.

Pathfinder and the *d20 System* make things a little trickier. That's because the numbers in those systems are bloated and they tend to rise very quickly as players gain levels. So, if you need to improvise a DC for an action, you need to follow a few steps.

First, start with a DC 10, 15, or 20 for an Easy, Average, or Difficult task. Next, if you think the task would benefit from training, talent, or special knowledge, increase that DC by 5. Then, decide if the task is leveled. Now, that's a tricky little concept. Ask yourself if the task is something that should increase in difficulty as the PCs increase in level. Ask if it's something that only high-level PCs should encounter.

For example, if Leroy the Goblin Rogue (formerly known as 42) is trying to climb a masonry wall in God King Tyracticus' Fortress of Doom, well, you wouldn't expect that to be any harder than climbing any other masonry wall just because it's God King Tyracticus' wall. A wall is a wall. But if Leroy were instead picking the lock on one of Tyracticus' doors, you'd expect the lock to be of exceptional quality because God King Tyracticus would use the best locks he could get in his fortress. This is a weird concept, but it's based on the idea that some challenges can be expected to grow in difficulty as the heroes grow in power level.

If the challenge is something that you think should be leveled — that it should be more challenging because it's part of a higher-level adventure — add the PCs level to the DC.

An example is in order. If Tullegrin Underhill — a level 6 character — is attempting to pick the lock on God King Tyracticus' treasure vault, you'd start by setting the base DC at 20. Treasure vaults should be very hard to open. Then, you'd add 5 because picking locks is something that benefits from talent and training, unlike, say, smashing down doors. Then, because God King Tyracticus has the best locks around and his fortress is a higher-level adventure, add Leroy's level, 6, to the DC. The final DC is 31.

And that simple process is how you improvise a DC in *Pathfinder*.

Surprise! You're Hurt

You can now mechanically improvise pretty much any ability check and set the DC easily. Unless you're running *Pathfinder*. Then it's mostly easy except that DC part. But sometimes, you find yourself having to improvise a damage effect. For example, how much damage does Dane take after lighting a torch to investigate the mysterious oily smell coming from those barrels of shiny liquid over there?

Fortunately, both *Pathfinder* and *Dungeons & Dragons* are on similar scales here for hit points and damage, so you only need to remember one rule to set the damage dice for any improvised, damaging effect like a trap or an exploding barrel full of oil.

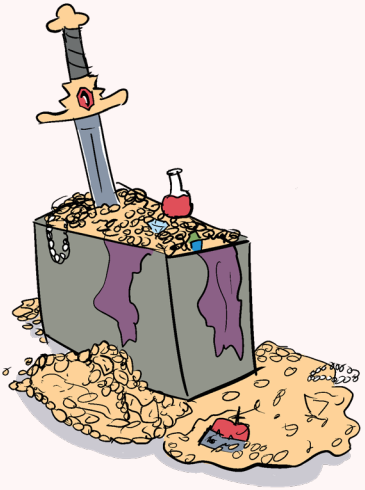
Start with a 1d6 for low damage, 1d8 for medium damage, and 1d10 for high damage. If the damage can happen more than once, decrease the size of the die. So, if the explosion will set characters on fire and they'll keep taking damage every round, reduce 1d6 to 1d4, 1d8 to 1d6, and 1d10 to 1d8. With me so far?

Now, ask yourself if the damage is leveled? That's basically the same as the question I mentioned above. Basically, if the damage is coming from something that varies based on quality — like damage from a trap or magical effect — it's leveled. If quality isn't an issue, like the damage from a falling rock or an exploding barrel of oil — it isn't leveled.

If the damage is leveled, roll half as many dice as the PCs have levels. For level 8 PCs, roll four of whatever damage die you decided. For that barrel of oil, assuming you started with a d8 and reduced it to d6 because it does damage every round, you're rolling 4d6 damage.

Finally, if the damage can hit multiple characters — because it targets multiple creatures or covers an area — reduce the number of dice by half. That fiery explosion? It can engulf multiple characters, so it goes down to 2d6. Do that even if it actually only hits one character, by the way. It doesn't matter how many characters the explosion *does* hit; just how many it *can* hit.

And with that, you can pretty much handle any random effect that deals damage for which there is no rule. And, fortunately, that's the most mechanically complicated thing I'm going to cover in this book. But, unfortunately, it's not the most unpleasant.



Chapter 16:

When Everything Goes Wrong

As a Game Master, you wear a lot of hats. You're a narrator, a referee, a director, an actor, a storyteller, a game designer, a teacher, and even an accountant. And most of those hats are fun to wear. Except that accounting hat. Well, I like my accounting hat, but then, that was also my day job before I decided to take a huge pay cut and try out this author-and-freelance-game-designer thing. At least I've finally got a book with my name on it.

The point is, running games is fun. Which is as it should be. This is really just a hobby about hiding in a basement, playing with action figures, and pretending to be elves. Sure, GMing does involve a lot of work sometimes. But it's a labor of love. And if it isn't a labor love, well, it's time to find another hobby.

But there is another hat you have to wear sometimes. And it's a sucky hat to wear. But you can't run a game without that hat. It's a captain's hat. Because, like it or not, as the GM, you're the captain and the game is your ship. And the reason that sucks is because you're not like the captain of a cruise ship. Unfortunately, you're

the captain of a working boat. And sometimes things go wrong. Sometimes the crew screws up and puts the whole ship in danger. And sometimes the ship rams into an ice berg. And sometimes, that means you go down with the ship.

This chapter is all about your responsibility as captain of the ship that is your game. Your duty to your players and your duty to yourself. And how to handle it when things go wrong. It's not a fun chapter. Because it's a chapter about dead characters and disappointed players. And it's a chapter about hurting feelings and losing friends. Yeah. It's only a game, right? Until someone's feelings are involved.

Agreeing to Have Fun Right

Look, an RPG is just a game, right? Just a bunch of friends getting together and having a good time. Right? Well, yes. And no. See, an RPG is a bunch of friends getting together and agreeing to have a specific kind of fun. You all get together because you like each other, but you also get together because you want to play an RPG. You don't need the RPG to get together and have fun. There's board games and beer pong and whatever else you kids do these days if you just want to gather and have fun. Playing an RPG is like being on a bowling league or softball team. And that means everyone accepts some responsibility for the group's fun.

If you're on a bowling league because you really like bowling, you're going to get tired of the one jerk who shows up every week to just drink beer and make jokes and always forgets his turn and never has his bowling shoes and holds up the game. And you don't want to deal with those two bowlers who decided to start dating and then broke up and now they're just fighting every week instead of bowling. That's not what you signed up for.

It's the same with an RPG. You all agreed to play the game. Some of you might take it more seriously than others and each of you is playing for different reasons, but you all made a deal. And if someone is wrecking the groups fun, you all have a right to be mad.

And guess what, *el capitan*? Someone has to take charge. Groups can't manage themselves. It's a known psychological fact called the diffusion of responsibility or something. If no one is in charge, no one is going to take responsibility. So, when something goes wrong — when someone is disrupting the game, or someone just isn't fitting in — well, the buck stops with you. You're the one who has to fix the problem.

Eventually, you are going to have to wear that captain's hat. And it's going to suck. And you might lose a friend over it. I have. And after that, you're going to wonder if this stupid game of pretend elves is even worth it. And you'll have to decide that for yourself.

I can't tell you whether it's worth it. Hopefully, you won't have to wear that hat often enough for you to even question it. But, what I can do is give you some advice for dealing with the captain's hat and coming through it okay. But before I discuss the big stuff, like arguments and fights and attendance issues, let me start with small things like death.

Failing and Dying

Eventually, the players are going to screw up badly enough to fail an adventure. They won't rescue the princess in time, they won't stop the goblins from burning the town, they won't defeat the elder forest god Shrub Niggurath before his tendrils overrun the world and turn everyone into plant zombies. Whatever. They are going to fail. Eventually. And eventually, a hero is going to die. Maybe all the heroes will die. Maybe that's how they failed. I mean, if Shrub Niggurath won, all the heroes had better end up dead. Otherwise, they weren't really trying. Doesn't matter.

Now, failed adventures and dead characters are hard to deal with. The players will probably feel like crap. Losing any game feels bad. And losing a character you've spent months playing feels even worse. These things feel so bad that some GMs choose to avoid the issue altogether. They don't let their players lose. They don't let the heroes die. They make sure there's always a way out. They fudge die rolls, lie about stats, or just outright say "nope, never mind, you didn't die after all, everything is fine."

I can't tell you not to do those things. But don't do those things. Because they destroy one of the hearts of the game. Yeah, you remember those, right? **Chapter 8**. One of the hearts of the game is agency. The hero's choice determines the outcomes. If you make it impossible for the heroes to lose, you're robbing them of their freedom to determine their own destiny. Now, some players won't care so much. But some players — like challenge seekers — will care. A lot. They'll feel cheated when they discover nothing was at risk.

So, what do you do? Well, be fair, be consistent, let the dice fall where they may, and let destiny take its course. In short, let the players fail. And if the heroes die, let them die.

Or don't.

Look, I feel very strongly about failure. If the heroes fail, let them fail. That's what makes the game a game. And, as a GM, if you don't want failure to end the game, don't put the entire world at risk. Don't endanger anything you're not willing to destroy. Don't kidnap a princess if you're not willing to run a game in which the princess is never found. Don't send goblins against a town if you're not willing to burn that town to the ground. Don't point your GMing gun at something if you're not willing to pull the trigger.

But that's failure. Death, on the other hand? Death sucks. It's extremely disruptive. When a hero dies, it derails the whole game. Yes, it's emotional and moving and poignant and all that. But it's also a pain in the butt. The player has to make a new character. You have to figure out how to work the new character into the game. The rest of the party, meanwhile, has to survive while they're one member down. And if they're in the heart of enemy territory, that might be a disaster. And that's to say nothing of whatever plotlines might die with that character. Death sucks. It wrecks everything.

If you want to remove death from the game, fine, do it. There're all sorts of alternate rules out there. Replace death with lasting injuries, for example. You get knocked out, you have to recover, and you're left with some permanent injury. Then, you can decide if you want to retire the character and start fresh. Or let the players decide whether they are dead or merely knocked out for a time. That's fine too. Just don't make whatever you replace death with easy to spring back up from. A non-death should still be very disruptive. It should cost a lot. It just doesn't have to cost a character.

Whatever you decide though — about failure and death — decide it before you have to deal with it. Don't wait until your first failed adventure or dead character to decide how you're going to handle those things. And don't lie to the players. Tell them, flat out, how you're going to handle failure and death. And if they don't like how you're handling it, maybe you need to rethink it. I've tried to remove death from my games a few times, and my players have rebelled nearly every time. Death — and failure — give adventures meaning.

Attendance Problems

Okay, now we're moving on to a more serious issue. Attendance, lateness, and reliability. It might seem weird to discuss the sorts of crap that you used to hate getting marked off for in school when we're talking about a game about pretend elves, but remember, you all agreed that this was what you were going to do for fun.

I shouldn't have to tell you that attendance, lateness, and reliability can actually be pretty serious — even game-breaking — issues. Everyone has agreed to set aside a chunk of time every week or month or whatever for this game. They've moved their schedule around for it. And they've probably passed up other things they could be doing because it's game night. And you — as the GM — have probably spent a few hours before the game just to get everything ready to go. To make sure there's a game.

A missing player can be pretty disruptive. Especially if the party is in the middle of an adventure. Suddenly, there's a character without a brain and the team is down a member. That's bad enough, but two missing players can be enough to cancel a game if the group is small

enough. And that means the GM and the people who did show up are just out of luck. Too bad for them, right?

Even lateness can be bad. If the group waits for the late member to start, they are losing precious game time. And that game time can be at a premium for busy adults who had to rework their schedules just to have a game night at all. If the group doesn't wait, the game is still going to grind to a halt when the tardy member shows up and settles in and catches up. That sucks too.

Attendance, lateness, and reliability are issues. They are serious issues. Because each member of the group should respect the value of every other member's time. And they should all respect the value of your time as a GM. Sometimes emergencies happen, of course. Sometimes things do come up. And hopefully, in the event of a problem, the affected member does whatever they can to get word to the group. If it's possible. And if someone has a genuine emergency and can't get word to the group, they can be forgiven.

But if you have one or more members who periodically miss sessions or show up late or leave early, they are a problem. And if your whole group is unreliable, that's a big problem. You can't manage a game like that and you shouldn't have to.

And it falls to you, oh captain of the ship, to deal with the irresponsible sailor. Or crew.

Some GMs like to dock experience points or otherwise find ways to penalize players for bad attendance through their characters. This is wrong. Very wrong. You never, ever deal with an out-of-game problem in the game. Never solve a problem with a player through their character. It won't work. It never works.

There is only one way to deal with this issue: pull the wayward player aside, away from the table, and talk to them in private. Tell them, in no uncertain terms, that their attendance is a problem. Ask them to correct it. And leave it at that. If it continues, pull them aside again and tell them that they have a choice: correct the problem or leave the group.

Yes. That sucks. Especially when it's a friend. Sorry. Being a GM sucks sometimes. But you've got a responsibility to the other players. And to yourself. And, if you don't think it's worth it, role-playing games aren't the hobby for you. And neither are bowling leagues or softball teams or book clubs or anything else where everyone makes a promise to a group for their mutual enjoyment.

I'm sorry to be harsh, but when it comes to this crap, someone needs to be harsh. And that someone is the GM.

Arguments, Conflicts, and Bad Behavior

Whenever you have a group of friends together playing a game — or even a group of strangers — there's always the possibility of

an argument or conflict or someone engaging in disruptive and upsetting behavior. Especially when one member of the group has nominal authority over the others. Yeah, that title comes with some nominal authority, Mr. or Mrs. Game Master. Sorry.

I can't document every source of potential argument or conflict and I can't catalogue every form of disruptive behavior. I know other GMs have tried to do that in other advice books, but it's pointless. What's disruptive for one group might be all in good fun for another. Some groups, especially of young men, spend ninety percent of their time trash-talking each other and then walk away laughing about it. Stealing loot from the other heroes might be an unforgiveable sin in one group but just part of the game in another group. So, it's pointless to try and catalog all the ways people's feelings might explode into conflict.

But, as a GM, you've got to keep an eye out for it. Conflicts between the heroes in the game can spill into conflicts between the players. Or two players might bring a personal fight from the bar last night to the game table tonight. A player might not like a rules call you made and they might blow up about it. I've been running games for friends, strangers, kids, and adults for thirty years. I've seen it all. Trust me.

When some sort of conflict does erupt, you've got to identify it, defuse it, and rectify it. No one else is going to. Your table, your game, your ship, your hat. And that can be especially hard if the conflict is directed at you.

The first thing to do when tensions run high is to stop the game. Call for a break. Encourage everyone to step away. Grab a drink. Non-alcoholic. Alcohol is not a solution to interpersonal conflict. Go outside. Get some air. Just let everything calm down. Usually, the moment will pass. The angry people will calm down, get embarrassed, and get past it. If the game can continue, great. If not, well, you've got some talking to do.

First, never deal with any conflict in front of the group. If there's a conflict that requires you to talk to a player, deal with it in private. Do not put anyone on the spot. That makes them defensive. Second, no matter what, accept the fact that you're to blame for whatever happened. Even partly. Even if you're not. You can't have any pride here. You need to be able to own any problem at your table, even one you didn't cause. And that's because, third, your job is not to pass judgment or apportion blame. Your job is to run a game. If two players are having a problem, you cannot and should not solve it for them. All you can do is calm them down — separately — and tell them they can't bring their problem to the table. They have to fix the actual problem. It's that simple. And if someone has a problem with you, well, swallow your pride, hear them out, listen to their criticism,

and fix whatever issue they are calling you on. Even if you don't think they're right, they're feeling something. Those feelings are valid. Talk it out. Like adults. But you have to be the open one, captain. You have to be the better person, sometimes.

If someone is being disruptive and causing problems for others, then things are a little different. You don't have to apportion blame and you don't have to pass judgement, but you do have to tell the person that their behavior is disrupting the game. And, as hard as it is, you can't spread the responsibility out. You can't use plural nouns. You can't speak for anyone but you and the game. Their behavior is disrupting the game and causing a problem for you. End of story. And that's how it has to be even if other players have come to you and asked you to deal with the situation. They are disrupting the game and causing a problem for you. Not everyone. Not Alice. Not Bob. It's you. Own it. Captain.

When you're talking to a player, give them the benefit of the doubt. Here them out and seek a compromise, but don't be a pushover. If they agree to change their behavior, give them a chance. And if they slip up now and then, well, forgive that. Changing behavior is hard and the apology and the attempt are worth a lot. Hopefully, you can work out any conflict or disruption like adults and move on.

And if not?

Well, there comes a point when you have to choose the game and yourself or the friendship. If someone is disruptive, argumentative, and problematic and they don't respond to adult conversation, you have to ask yourself if it's worth putting up with it — and making the players put up with it — or whether it's time to show that player the door. And I can't tell you how to answer that question either.

All I can say is that, GMing is a lot of fun. And it's very rewarding. But sometimes, it's just shit.

Chapter 17:

To Be Continued...

Chapter 16 sure sucked, didn't it? What a downer. But let's end this on a positive note. Let's talk about gaming forever.

This book has mostly been about running games one session at a time. About the basic skills you need to get behind the GM Screen for the first time and about honing your craft to run the least worst games you can run. And I think I've equipped you pretty well for your first weeks and months and even years as a role-playing game GM. But I want to finish off by introducing the exciting possibilities of campaign play. Of running an ongoing series of adventures over the course of months or years, with the same players and the same characters.

Now, I can't cover everything there is to know about running campaigns, or even about getting campaigns off the ground. Not in one small chapter crammed into the back of this overstuffed book. But I can at least give you some idea of how to get a campaign off the ground. And, as you run your campaign, I'm sure you'll feel the rest out. You've gotten this far through the book. I believe in you.

A campaign is — as I noted back in **Chapter 9** — a series of interconnected adventures in which mostly the same players play mostly the same heroes. At least, that's the simplest definition. But a real campaign is actually a bunch of chapters in a big, overarching story. It's real epic stuff. A short campaign with a limited number of adventures is called an adventure path. But a campaign can last for months or even years and contains dozens of adventures. My longest campaign lasted about five years. And then all the heroes died, and the world was destroyed. These things happen.

Campaigns start with a premise, an idea for what the campaign is about. Smart GMs come up with their premise after having a special meeting with their players called a session zero. After the session zero, the GM presents the premise to the players in the form of a pitch. If the players like the pitch and everyone agrees, the GM builds the campaign, the players create their characters, and then you play until you're done.

Threading Adventures Together

You'll recall from **Chapter 13** that a story's plot consists of an incitement, a series of plot points, a climax, a resolution, and a dénouement. At least, I hope you recall that. Because it's important. Anyway, all of those events — incitement, plot points, climax, etc. — are strung along a plot thread. And you can weave multiple plot threads together. And that's how you build an adventure.

Well, that's also how you build a campaign. Or at least, it's how you *can* build a campaign. See, a campaign can be just a series of completely unrelated adventures starring the same characters in the same world. That's called an episodic campaign. That's how TV series like *Star Trek* are structured.

But you can also build a campaign like a giant, super adventure. That is, you can take one or more plot threads, weave them together, and build individual adventures out of the plot points. And in between, you can also scatter isolated, one-off adventures to fill some space.

The number of plot threads, if there are any at all, and what they are, forms the premise of the campaign. Basically, that structure defines what the campaign is about and how it's going to play out.

Now, the plot threads themselves can be anything at all. You can just have one, big plot thread about destroying a magic ring to stop Satan and save the world or about rebels trying to destroy an evil empire or whatever. Or you can weave together a couple of different plot threads. Maybe one is about uncovering the mystery of a lost, ancient kingdom while another is about defeating a cult that worships a terrible two-headed, demonic lemur queen. The threads can connect to each other. And one thread might even be

instrumental in resolving the other. For example, maybe the cult dates back to the ancient lost kingdom and the secret to defeating the demonic lemur queen lies in the history of that ancient kingdom.

If you're looking for something with lower stakes than saving the world from evil cults or Satan or whatever, one fun way to structure a campaign is to have each player pick a personal goal and then build a plot thread for each goal and interweave those. Or you can have a single, simple goal like "get rich as mercenary adventurers" and let each player decide why their character is into that goal.

You can even start a campaign without any sort of goal or thread at all and then add one later. Like, after the heroes explore some ancient ruins in one adventure, you realize they're really into it, so you decide to build a big plot thread about recovering all of the ruins of the ancient kingdom. And later, you get a neat idea for a demon lemur queen and you add that plot thread in. As long as the players are engaging with the plot threads, it's all good. But it's best to start a campaign with at least some kind of plan for how it's going to go.

The Ties That Bind

Apart from the structure of the campaign, the other major aspect of starting a campaign is figuring out what's keeping the party together. What binds the heroes to each other? Why are they adventuring at all? And when they encounter problems, what is it that makes them want to stay together? This is an important aspect of campaign play that many GMs overlook. And that's dangerous. Because it can cause a serious problem later when the players realize there's no good reason in the story for their heroes to keep working together. At that point, all it takes is one good argument to make the players realize their heroes should split up, but it'll break the game if they do. And then there's a crisis.

Now, if the campaign has a strong goal — especially one with high stakes like "save the world" — and the players know that going in, they can create characters who are unified in that pursuit. But if the goals are weak — like make money as a band of mercenary adventurers — or if each hero has their own personal goal to pursue, it's worth it to figure out what's going to keep the heroes together when their resolve is tested. Personal relationships might work. Organizational ties work better. The heroes might all be related to each other. Or they might be members of the same noble house. Or they might have been raised from orphans by the same gruff-but-caring scoundrel with a heart of gold on his smuggling ship. Or they might be members of the same rebel alliance or adventuring guild or Kiwanis Club or Moose Lodge or whatever.

Fortunately, you don't have to figure this stuff out for yourself. You can make your players do a lot of the work. And that's where a session zero comes in.

Hour

A session zero is a special meeting between the members of a gaming group. It happens before the game gets underway. That's why it's called session zero. It happens before the first session. During session zero, you — the GM — talk to the players about the sort of game you want to run. You bounce ideas off each other and try to get enough ideas to come up with a premise for a game that the players will actually like.

A session zero should be a nice, casual thing. The best session zeroes are friendly chats about gaming with no distractions. The players should be free to talk about their likes and dislikes, about stories, about games, and about things in general. You should let the players talk freely unless they wander too far from the topic of games and stories and what they like and don't like. Then you should prod them back to the topic of the upcoming game. The point isn't to grill the players, it's just to listen to them as they spew out ideas. You'll probably be pretty quiet for most of the session zero, but you should take a lot of notes.

You want to pay careful attention to the players. Listen for good game ideas as well as clues about what they like and what they don't like. You might even watch out for clues about which types of engagements the players prefer. Remember those from **Chapter 8**? If you catch hold of a particularly good idea, float it back out over the group. "I heard someone say they liked exploration-based games and they wanted to save the world? Do those sound like fun ideas?"

Of course, there's also some administrative crap that has to happen. You might have to work out a schedule. How often will you play? When will you meet? And you might even discuss what game system to use and what genre of game you want to play. Those conversations can take place before or after the main chat. Don't interrupt the chat itself.

Likewise, don't allow distractions to hinder the chat. If you're going to do your session zero over dinner, for example, finish dinner before you start talking. The chat should be free and open, but it should also be focused. Don't let anything take the spotlight from the discussion itself.

Eventually, you'll have a piece of paper filled with notes. And then it'll be time to end the session and tell the players you'll be in touch.

The Wind Up and the Pitch

Finally, your job is to come up with a pitch. You need to figure out how the campaign is going to be structured, whether it will have any plot threads at all, and what those plot threads might be. You'll also need to have some idea of what might tie the players together. You'll need to know the genre and make some decisions about the setting, whether its traditional fantasy or a space opera or seafaring between pirate islands or set on the western front and the lost continent of Thule during World War II or whatever. You don't need to know everything, but you need to know enough that you can go to your players and say "okay, here's the idea for what the game we're going to play is going to be about, does that sound good?"

And once you have that pitch, however detailed it is, send it to your players and ask them if they like it. If everyone says yes, you have a campaign to start. And they have characters to make. You might want to have another meeting to generate characters or you might want to come up with some details about the game and then have the players create their characters from that. From here on out, how you handle it is up to you.

It's your game. Well, yours and the players.

Dénouement

Every good book needs a falling action. And for this book, this is it:

Dear Reader:

If this book is your first exposure to gaming and if it's started you on the path of playing and running fantasy adventure role-playing games, welcome to the hobby. Good luck and Godspeed. I wish you many happy years of the least worst games you can possibly run.

If you've been running games for years and this book was just a refresher or a new perspective on GMing, I hope you got something good out of it. I hope the hobby has been good to you. And I wish you many more happy years of gaming.

Whatever your level of experience and wherever you go from here, just remember that everything I've written is just advice. It's good advice. It's worked for me for a long time. And I've spent a long time figuring it out. But it's still just one dude's advice. It might work for you, but it might not. Don't take anything I've said on blind faith. Try it for yourself. If it works, great. If it doesn't, sorry. Try something else. You can't get good at running games by reading a book. Even a great book written by a brilliant, charismatic genius like me.

The only way to get good at anything is to keep being bad at it until you get good at it.

Stick with it.

And remember, I'm just some jerk from the internet. You don't need my permission to run your game any wrong way you want.

Sincerely,
Scott "The Angry GM" Rehm
July 31, 2018

About the Author

The Angry GM is a cartoon character from the Internet who's been dispensing no-nonsense gaming advice on his self-named website for ten years. Currently, he lives on the Internet with his girlfriend The Tiny GM.

Scott Rehm is a real person from Long Island, New York. He's existed for forty years and he's been running role-playing games of all types — including *Dungeons & Dragons* among many, many others — steadily for thirty of them. He's also an accountant, but he asks you not to judge him for that. He actually does have a personality. And a soul. A small one. Currently, he lives on the shore of Lake Michigan in Wisconsin with his soulmate Allie.

Have you ever wondered what the deal is with games like *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder*? What are they? What are RPGs? How do they work? How do you play them? And what's a Game Master anyway?

Well, wonder no longer. The Angry Game Master is here to explain it all.

Game Angry: How to RPG the Angry Way will introduce you to the amazing world of table-top role-playing games. It'll tell you everything you need to get yourself into the world of RPGs: what to buy, how to play, and how to organize your first game session for your friends. And if you already know all that, Game Angry will help you improve your game mastering skills so you can run the best least worst games you can possibly run. And it'll explain it all with the no-nonsense, direct teaching style of an Army drill sergeant who graduated from a Catholic school.

Whether you've never played or run a table-top role-playing game before or you've been running games wrong for years, Game Angry can help. As long as you can handle a little attitude.

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