

The GM Challenge Compilation



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The Opening Gambit

by Chris Kotalik, [Hill Cantons](#)

Beedo of *Dreams in the Lich House* posted a survey piece that ended with the punchline that the ultimate X-factor in tabletop rpgs is the creativity of the GM. Tearing down or building up that assertion itself could fill up several posts, but I was taken more by a gauntlet he dropped in the resulting comments. "something I'd like to see more bloggers discuss is their successful table techniques that translate into good games."

Active GM worth their salt are constantly honing up, mulling over, tearing apart, and obsessing around what makes or breaks their home games. Why is the topic so under-represented in our writings? Why the strange disconnect?

No wait, don't answer that.

Instead, let's try and make good on poor Beedo's deathbed wish with the following challenge.

1. **Name three "best practices" you possess as a GM. What techniques do you think you excel at?**
2. **What makes those techniques work? Why do they "pop"?**
3. **How do you do it? What are the tricks you use? What replicable, nuts-and-bolts tips can you share?**

Your temptation will be to cheat; to name more than three or collapse them into a very generalized theme.

Don't give in. Focusing on three very specific techniques makes the whole exercise more concrete, more potentially portable to another GM.

The Six Million Dollar GM: Faster, Stronger, Now With More Funions

by Arkhein, [Rather Gamey](#)

Everything important that I've learned about running a role playing game I discovered in the first few years of playing.

The remaining decades are just filled with me having to relearn these basic tenants because I've read gaming advice that sounds good, but ultimately falls short.

Now when I say YOU in the points below, I mean ME. I'm talking to myself here, and the games that I play. What works for other people is different that what works for me. You probably shouldn't even be reading this because it will screw up your game.

1. Stop fucking planning.

Really dude, just stop it. Being prepared is one thing, but sitting around, imagining what the players are going to do and coming up with some sort of tree branch decision matrix outcome generation system is futile. It's not going to be exciting.

Let the players do whatever the hell they want and react to it on the fly. Build the world each step of the way as the players put their foot down on that particular patch of grass. Sure, sketch out a map, imagine some dungeon ideas, flesh out an npc – but never expect that the players will go to those lands, explore those dungeons, or meet those characters.

The players can't screw up your plans if you don't have any, and it's kind of rude to expect the very free-thinking players that you want to be playing with to hop aboard your choo-choo train of railroadiness, no matter how grand it might play out in your head.

The best 'planning' for a game is to read lots of adventure fiction, ancient history books, geology texts, and Shakespeare.

Go watch Mythbusters and play with LEGOs. Devour information and play games. Feed your mind the building blocks of world making so you can have the tools to build on the fly.

2. Don't you dare open that rulebook.

Looking up monsters stat, equipment lists, or random tables is okay. But don't waste anyone's time digging for rules DURING A GAME. If you can't remember it – it was obviously too complicated anyway.

Recently, one of my newer players had a character in the water, fighting a sewer kraken in 4e. I told him that he was at a negative two to hit.

"Is that in addition to the underwater combat modifications listed in the rules?"

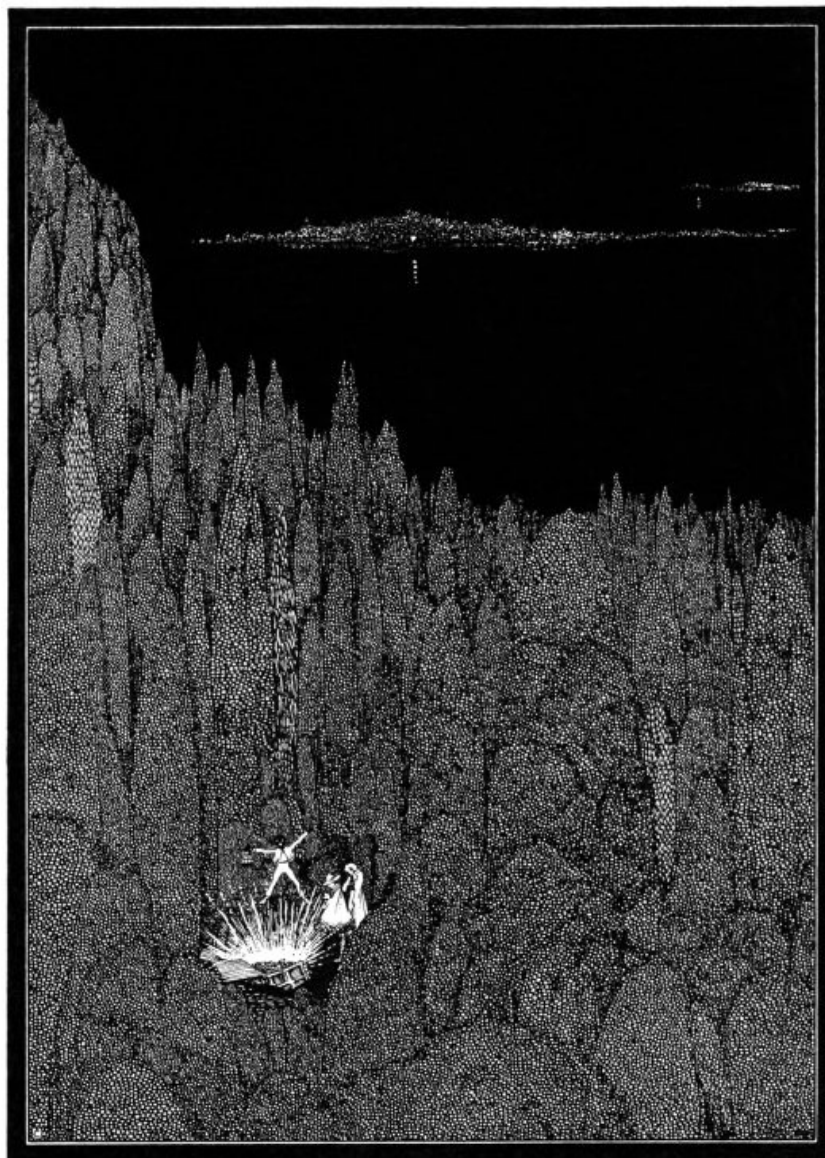
I chuckled. "I don't remember what the 4e rules for underwater combat are, and I don't care. You are at a negative 2. Go."

He looked like I was speaking Martian to him, but he continued. Later he joined my Labyrinth Lord game as well, so evidently the way I was running things wasn't too repulsive to him.

3. Leave the damn dice alone.

If you roll the dice, accept the result. You asked the universe a question. The universe gave you an answer. Deal or don't

roll the dice in the first place. The universe typically makes better decisions than you anyway, since, you know, it can't be WRONG, so you might as well go with it. And it works because I never feel guilty about cheating or short-changing the players from the full 'gaming experience.



Building the Better GM

by Beedo, [Dreams in the Lich House](#)

Make a Calendar

A calendar implies that you're marking the passage of time – turns, hours, days, weeks, months. You're tracking climate, the weather. On the macro level, have future events happening in the larger world that are tied to the calendar. During July, the border skirmish between Kingdom A and Kingdom B will erupt in war. Nothing adds some basic verisimilitude to the world like a calendar and a list of potential upcoming events and weather; the list is very easy to generate in advance. It's huge when sandboxing.

Use a Progressive Descriptive Technique

"In the room is a book case, with a number of shelves and volumes, and a large desk in the corner." Keep initial descriptions brief so the players can direct their own attention, instead of front-loading the exposition. Hold back the fact that the desk is a large roll-top Victorian style, locked, with initials "AS" carved in the front of the drawer – that's second level stuff that's important when they go and investigate it closer.

Never Fudge the Dice

Use lots of random tables and accept the results specifically to spur creativity. Instead of making the wandering encounter in the Orc Woods have to be orcs, isn't it more interesting to use a random result (Halflings!) and then have to quickly improvise why the group is encountering Halflings in the Orc Woods?

NPC Back Stories are Irrelevant

Instead of writing about NPC back stories, jot down or two quick things about their appearance, manner of speech, physicality at the table, or favorite sayings. NPCs need to "tell their story" in single servings. Example: you could write up a long boring back story about the abused tavern wench that's 99% likely never going to come up, or you could just write in her NPC description – 'look down at the table when this character speaks, don't make eye contact with any of the players' and suddenly you have a much more interesting NPC. Everyone's wondering what's wrong with her?

On Being Forced Against Your Will

by -C, [Hack and Slash](#)

1) The most important thing you can do as any kind of game master or designer is to NOT REMOVE PLAYER AGENCY.

Player agency is the single most important factor of a satisfying game.

I should point out that games that have little player agency (Cosmic Encounter for instance) can be quite fun. What they do not support is long term memorable campaigns.

What is player agency? Two things. Does the player have choices? and more importantly do those choices matter?

Walking down the hall and popped by a trap? No player agency if the trap was just checked for by some roll the players had no control over. Minimal player agency if the player could put points into a find traps/perception/spot skill. Great player agency, if all traps are visible, and the players have to make choices on how to bypass the traps. Examples of how to use player agency in play.

Things that remove player agency. Fudging dice rolls. Using a magician's switch. Engaging in pallet shifting. *[Editor's Note: moving areas around in an adventuring locale to create the illusion of choice.]*

2) Remember that the point is to have fun. There are two key critical factors to this.

A) Fun does not mean that everything goes the parties way – sometimes it means bad things (including TPK's) happen, because things that are not guaranteed, like success, are important. And having the choice you make matter is fun.

B) Pay attention to what your party is asking, and do not shut them down. Don't say no, explain what that's going to take to do, or who they will have to talk with to find out what to do.

Again for emphasis.

Don't Say No.

Pay Attention to what your players are really asking for.

Give them everything they ask for, and three things they don't.

3) Have some fun with the game. Ham up your NPC's. Speak in funny accents. Remember to not expect your players to treat the NPC's like real people, but have them react like real people and comment on the craziness of the players. Remember that all these comments are for entertainment value, to make everyone laugh, and enjoy the NPC – not be difficult or obtuse for the sake of teaching lessons. Have them provide some post modern commentary on events.

Have the NPC's have wildly differing character traits, like the Kuo-Toa, who are really cool, like frat dudes, who have some non-specific plan for taking over the surface world. When the party attacks, they scream and ask, "BLUBWHHY ARE-GARBLE YOU GUYS SUCH DICKS?!!!"

Beedo covered several important logistical things in his post – Describing the most important thing down to the least important, and keeping things vague until they are examined. Track time.

What is important to remember, is that the point is to have fun. If you find yourself ever trying to do anything next other than make it more entertaining, then you're wrong for that. It is important never to forget you are guys hanging out in a room, just because you're a DM, doesn't mean you're the boss of them – just responsible for their enjoyment.



Gauntlet Thrown, I Accept Your Challenge Sir

by James C. [A Dungeon Master's Tale](#)

1. I speak with my whole body when DMing. I've read some opinions online in recent months and years regarding the use of boxed text vs. paraphrased text when running adventure modules. While I see merits in both, recently I realized that for me personally it made little difference whether I was reading or paraphrasing text, it could be equally engaging and evocative or laborious and tedious depending on how well or badly it was presented. What mattered most, of course, was the delivery. The times when I was moving around a bit, emoting, pacing my speech like a good spoken performance and treating it as such the game seemed better.

So recently I've been more consciously engaging the players with eye contact, standing up and throwing out my arms to describe rooms or scenic vistas and that sort of thing. Don't get me wrong, I'm not LARFing. I don't do funny voices often nor change my physicality much when taking on an NPC. I don't fault anybody that does and appreciate those who can. I'm just naturally more comfortable with a more detached voice as a DM. The problem is that detached can easily morph into dull.

There's a sweet-spot for me where I'm still the omniscient voice but I'm hopping up and out of my seat and waving my arms to make a point or walking out from behind the screen to really get into it. The non-verbal feedback from the players is that they're less likely to be staring at a phone or having a side discussion. This fool just stood up to demonstrate how awkwardly the halfling climbed out of a barrel. Way more interesting than this tweet or your story about the guy in line at the liquor store is what I'm seeing. If you don't do funny voices either, but feel your presentation is lacking some pop, just start off by standing up the next time you describe something and see what happens. Take it from there.

2. I Prepare. The party may go off on a wild tangent and me right along with them. On a good night the players can't tell that from whatever it was for which I was originally prepared. To some people this seems like winging it, but in truth it comes down to a broader preparation than just having the next 20 rooms statted out or an encounter table for the road between Bumbfuck and Timbuctoo. Know your world, know the beings in it. If your world is a dungeon and a town, know that. If it's a hex map 200 miles x 150 miles, then know that. Et cetera, et cetera. But before you do that, live a little. Read and learn and go do things and it'll all come that much more easily. The more you've done, studied or seen the better shot you've got in presenting a believable and interesting world to somebody else.

On the subject of living I say this. If your game has gotten better than it was 10 or 20 years ago I would offer that this is not a result of you grasping the rules any better. Rather, you're an older, wiser and more seasoned human being. So, take everything you do from hiking through a rainstorm to negotiating a price on a used car to visiting a foreign country for the first time to dealing with a shitty boss and file it away with D&D in mind. Come back to it and use it as needed.

Further, if you're getting ready to create a city for campaign use, know something about cities. You don't really need to buy a city-based role-playing source book. Take a walk around the nearest city. If that doesn't help, check a book out from the library or hit the internet. Need some rules on dungeon delving? Read up on what real-life spelunkers do. I swear there's probably 40 hours of this kind of preparation, away from graph and hex paper and anything resembling an RPG rule book, that goes into every playable hour of any game that I've ever run. It's also stuff I'm doing anyway, really.

3. I Resist Clutter. I've found that it's a simple enough practice to explain, but much harder to execute. But from my experience the extent to which one can limit the amount of crap at the table, the smoother things run. It's tough to draw

on the battle mat when you've got a bowl of chips and a plate of aged cheeses and finely seasoned meats (mmm..... meats) in the way. Clearly you want the snacks nearby (boy do I!), so figure out a way to keep them around without infringing upon the game.

If you're like me, and if you read this blog I suspect that in some way you must be, then you're not running the game right out of the box. You've got a pile of notes, house-rules, stuff you downloaded, stuff you're borrowing from another game entirely all potentially relevant on any given night. If your playing space is outside of your home, like mine, than you either need to lug all of this shit around or condense it somehow.

Even if lugging is an option, resist it. Condense it. Put it on a computer. I find that using a computer at the table detracts from the game and prevents me from doing a lot of #1 above, so I at least get it all into the same binder. Also there's lots of ways to make a pdf for free nowadays, so if you can get everything you need into one doc and hit the print button, you don't need any hardware. When I resume running a game again in the near future I'll be experimenting with the use of an e-reader at the table. I'm hoping that cuts down on the stacks of things I need to play given that they seem to handle .pdfs better now.



Table Rules

by Peter, [Dungeon Fantastic](#)

I've always, personally, had trouble staying on target and staying focused. I get distracted, pulled away by tangents, and then fatigued. This just feeds into the lack of focus. Couple this with the usual player indecisiveness, Monty Python jokes, and food/drink/bathroom/smoke breaks and you get a very disjointed session. So here is what I do.

1) Everything you say is in character, unless it's obviously out of character. So, "I do 10 damage" is out of character, as is "Peter, do you want a beer?" or "Hey, I think your PC is on fire." That sort of stuff. Everything else is in character. You need to rigorously enforce it, although early on you can get away with NPCs acting shocked as if at a bad joke ("What is this about coconut shells, sir? I only have horses . . . ") to nudge people back onto target. Rules questions that are on topic are fine, but disruptive ones should be treated however you treat poor roleplaying. "Do I know if my healing power can heal undead?" is fine, if the PC is faced with healing an undead. "Hey, if we were using Psi powers and I had a TL10 Psi Shield helmet, would that stop a Brain Sucker from eating my brain?" is NOT, not in a TL3 DF game when you are fighting orcs. Or even Brain Suckers.

Results so far: This has worked out pretty well, although it only got used in a playtest session we used as a dry run for DF. It helped keep people in character more, even if they are third-person ("My character draws his sword") instead of first person ("I draw my sword") players.

2) Table Music = In Play. When the background music starts, the game is in play. When it stops or is turned off, we are on official break. During official breaks, nothing is in character. You can ask anything, discuss anything, go get a smoke, order food, make Monty Python references. It's musical chairs - when the music stops, so does the game play.

Results so far: This has worked out very well. The music - so far I've used classical or soundtrack music - provides a nice background we can all easily talk over. But it's a constant aural reminder that we are in character and in play. Coupled with official breaks whenever the action stops or it seems like people need it, this has worked wonders. I knew people used music before but I saw my friend (and excellent GM) Ryan use this one. It exceeded my expectations in play, and it wasn't just "continuous background noise" but rather a tool in play.

3) Sit in the order of initiative. We go around the table in combat, so having people sit at the table in the order they play is very easy. I go as all NPCs, then the PCs go in order.

Results so far: This should work better than it does, but it does work. If you go clockwise, you know who goes before you so you can damn well be ready to go next.

Jumping on the Better GM Bandwagon

by FrDave, [Blood of Prokopious](#)

My answers are going to be very specific to a style of play influenced by the rules and "genre" of earlier editions of D&D. Whether or not they can be applied to any other rule set or genre is up to you.

Premise. D&D is at its best when it is a pastiche, because that is where it originated.

Therefore. My best campaigns and the best sessions I have within those campaigns are those that embrace, encourage and enable that pastiche.

Why. James over a Groggardia made two interesting observations about his experience at the OSRCon in Toronto. Firstly, how comfortable it was for him to run a pair of Dwimmermount sessions. Secondly, how comfortable Ed Greenwood seemed running his session in Forgotten Realms. This comfort in both cases comes from familiarity— Greenwood from spending decades steeped in his creation and James from running a continuous campaign for a couple of years.

For those of us who don't have the luxury of that kind of time or suffer from bouts of Gamer ADD, the best way to simulate this familiarity is by filling our game worlds with the familiar — pastiche from all kinds of stories, movies and genres. This familiarity breeds comfort, which breeds confidence, which is essential for creativity.

Given this premise, here are three ways in which I embrace, encourage and enable pastiche in my games.

1. Unapologetically steal ideas from everywhere. If an idea, story, image, movie, adventure module, trap, monster, whatever inspires you USE IT. You will naturally put your own spin on it and by the time it emerges from gameplay it will have transformed into something entirely new — but it will come from a familiar place that allows you the confidence to own the idea. The fact that you liked it in the first place will just fuel the creative fire.
2. Allow your players to bring their creativity to the table. This is, in part, an extension of my first point — don't be shy from using ideas that come from your players. If they come up with a theory for why something exists, happened, etc. don't be shy about incorporating it in part or in whole. This allows players to participate in your world and allows them to own it as much as you do. This, however, is only part of how to make players comfortable and familiar with your world. If they expect gravity to work, allow gravity to work. If it doesn't, give them a viable explanation as to why. What I mean by this is that if you have a giant system of gears that the players want to sabotage by literally throwing a wrench into the works, allow the wrench to muck things up. If it can't, give them viable cues as to why (there is a force field; the gears are made of stronger material than the wrench, etc.). Don't be afraid to decide these things via caveat rather than a die roll.
3. Finally, don't be afraid of genre-bending. One of the primary themes of the game is exploration. One of the best ways to simulate this is by breaking genre. It helps bring about a sense of wonder. One of the most memorable sessions I've ever played was on board a derelict space ship...in space. It also forces you to be creative in order to justify how such a break in genre is possible.

The Hill Cantons Challenge: Building a Better GM

by Sir Larkins, [RPG Corner](#)

Here is my constructive attempt to add to the conversation via my answers to the challenge.

1. I'd have to say my three best practices as a GM are: preparation, pacing, and characterization. Of the three, I'd say I excel at preparation (as explained below).

2. When I talk about excelling at preparation, I'm not talking about statting up NPCs or writing detailed, plot-heavy adventure notes, both of which I actually find a bit tiresome (although I'm working hard to change the former). In fact, my adventure notes these days, whether adapting a published scenario or running one of my own, tend to be in the form of tersely-worded bullet lists. When I talk about preparation, I'm talking about research. If the game is set in the real world, I research the adventure locale and time period extensively. In a fantasy environment, I look for real world analogues and weave them into the setting. But most of my games these days tend to be set in the real world or something based very closely on it, partly due to my penchant for research. When I ran my Cthulhu San Francisco game, I had at my side a 1924 California travel guide and a poster map reproduction of a map of the city circa the mid-1920s mounted in a cheap frame. My players were very appreciative whenever I hoisted that map up to show them where things were happening in relation to each other; it really gave them a sense of place. Players can also tell when you've done your background research properly; it comes through in the game in many subtle ways.

Pacing is something I worked on for years, and I'm quite satisfied with how I pace my games at this point. I always keep one eye on the clock and make an effort to not only wrap things up on time but also in a satisfying manner. If that means wrapping up an hour earlier than planned, so be it. If the scenario is finishing up that day, I make sure there's enough time to handle after-game tidying up (skill checks, experience points, etc.). If I can tell we won't be able to finish the scenario that session, I make sure we leave off at a suitably dramatic point (a cliffhanger, if I can at all swing it).

Of the three practices listed above, I personally feel that characterization is my weakest, but at the same time I have received many compliments on how much my players love to hate my villains, or on managing to successfully run multiple NPCs at once. I feel like my NPCs "pop" because I put some effort into differentiating them while simultaneously not making it overly obvious at first which ones are the "plot NPCs" and which ones are there merely for local color.

3. Getting a handle on pacing is partly a matter of knowing your group and how quickly they work. It doesn't take that long to do this. I started a new group made up entirely of strangers back in February and by the third session I had an excellent idea of how they worked together (which is quite quickly and efficiently, as it turned out!). Probably the best advice I got on pacing came from John Tynes in an old Unknown Armies essay online (link long since lost, unfortunately). He suggested watching movies, particularly thrillers and capers (I remember *Heat* was specifically called out), with an eye towards how the director paces the scenes, alternating intense action with dialogue-heavy sequences. (GMing advice really came into its own with the internet; some of the best tips I've picked up have been from online sources.)

The internet has, of course, also been a godsend for my preparation-related activities. As much as possible, I try and prepare visual aides, and the internet is great for finding fodder. My Pendragon games are full of color printouts of heraldry, armor, actors-as-NPCs, and maps, for example, all culled from the internet. When I run Call of Cthulhu, I go out of my way to create "realistic" handouts: if there's a photograph-cum-clue, I find a suitable subject on sites like Shorpy.com or the photo archives of major metropolitan libraries and then print it out on glossy photo paper; if a note is

supposed to be crumpled, I crumple the paper. Nothing too over-the-top, just enough to let the players' imaginations fill in the gaps (good GMing advice in general, incidentally).

I've always been a bit of a mimic, so my characterizations sometimes feature different voices. I don't go overboard with this either, but if the PCs are talking to a Russian count, for example, I trot out my best Russian accent. Working on mastering a broad range of believable accents is one of my great ongoing goals as a GM. For differentiating multiple NPCs without resorting to cartoon accents, I can't recommend enough simply listening to audio books (available for free from your local library). Just as you'd closely watch movies for their pacing, so too should you listen attentively to how the reader gives each character a slightly different inflection. Listen also to how male readers read female characters and vice-versa. Stephen Fry's readings of the Harry Potter series are particularly excellent. It doesn't take much to give an individual NPC some vocal character and you certainly don't have to resort to hammy acting or cheap theatrics to do so.

A couple other things to add from my GMing toolbox that don't fit the "big three" I came up with above but are definitely worth mentioning.

Accept the "iceberg theory" of GM prep: there will always be more going on behind the screen than the players ever see, and that's a good thing. Having a few notes on an NPC's background, even if the players never find out about it, can help you determine the NPC's motivations and actions in the moment.

Random elements are your friend. In fact, the more randomness the better. It helps keep you from turning into a railroader, and it's just plain fun. Don't forget the "G" part of "RPG": these are supposed to be games for everyone involved, including the GM, and figuring out a way to integrate off-the-cuff random elements into your precious story is a tremendously fun challenge that can open up possibilities you'd never previously thought of. It's one of the reasons I love Pendragon so much: the trait and passion rolls can drive PCs and NPCs alike in completely surprising directions.

Don't shy away from using published scenarios, but make them your own. There's a certain snobbishness, particularly in OSR circles, about running your own material in preference to using modules or published adventures. The poor reputation that published adventures enjoy, I suspect, comes from GMs who simply run them as-written, reading blocks of text out loud, their noses buried in a book. As someone who, due to time constraints, more often than not will use a published adventure if at all possible (it also helps that my two favorite games each boast repositories of literally dozens of scenarios), I can firmly say that running someone else's stuff in no way need hamper your own creativity. Take the published stuff and make it your own. Replace NPCs in the text with NPCs from your own campaign. Add or drop encounters. Change place names. Change MacGuffins, motivations, and anything else you don't like. Don't simply read the flavor text aloud; extemporize off the text the same way you would your own notes. Over the years I've observed that, doing this, the players legitimately can't tell the difference between when I'm running a published scenario versus one of my own devising.

What Works for Me

by [Trollsmyth](#)

Three "best practices" and how they work, etc.

1) Play Every Week.

We play (almost) every week. Every Thursday is game day, and my group game plays. Yes, I make that commitment to the game up-front, and I ask it of my players as well. We'll move stuff around on rare occasions when necessary, and cancel for holidays, but otherwise, we play every week.

This keeps the game fresh in everyone's minds. There's less fumbling around for what we were doing last time, and what everyone's goals are. There are also fewer cancellations or arguments about scheduling; everyone knows that Thursday is not open. We play, we play regularly, and we play for years.

Sometimes I can't play with great folks because they can't make that kind of commitment. That sucks, but I think it's worth it. Besides, I have a huge pool of players to pick from because...

2) I play online, via text-chat.

The entire world is my hobby shop. I've had players from as far away as Japan in my game. And no matter if I'm at home in Texas or visiting family in New Jersey, if I can find access to the intrawebs, we can play.

More than that, however, is the depth of play you get in text chat. Verisimilitude is heightened not only by the engrained habits of life-long readers, but also by access to everything that was said and done in character from the log files of previous games. Players also find it a lot easier to speak and act in-character via text. It's not at all rare for players to banter back-and-forth in-character in my text-chat games. Players interact with the world and the characters far more than they do at the table. It's just easier to suspend disbelief.

Understand that you also lose a lot playing this way. You lose body language and non-verbal cues and the way suddenly rolling the dice behind your DM screen focuses everyone's attention. The game is also slower, which is why it's vital that we play every week.

But it's absolutely worth it, because it really allows me to leverage my writing skills. Descriptive passages, characterization, mood and atmosphere are all much easier for me to conjure via text than I could at the table.

3) I play with topics that interest me.

In junior high and starting in high school, I was obsessed with the Arthurian legends and kept trying to invest my D&D games with that feel. I failed miserably.

But I never lacked for players or for ideas.

If you do it right, you'll be playing your new campaign for a long time, so it best be what you want to play, not what you

think (for whatever reason) you ought to play. Enthusiasm is infectious, it builds quickly under reinforcement, and can weather criticism (especially of the constructive sort). "Ought-to" and "should" will just make the thankless task of GMing an unmitigated burden.

These days, I'm most interested in pre-Roman ancient civilizations. Apparently, including terror birds was one of the aspects that attracted Oddysey to my game. Be honest about your passions, and you'll be far more likely to find folks who share them.



On Building a Better GM

by R.W. Chandler, [Black Hole Diaries](#)

It's hard to narrow it down to just 3 "best practices" really. In surveying my own thoughts on the issue, dozens of best practices come to mind, however I'll try to stick to what I believe are the 3 most important.

1. The game is not about you, it's about your players

It's a hard truth to accept for many GMs. We all have our own philosophies on how the game should be played, but ultimately, the only ones you really need to worry about impressing are your players. That is not to say that you fudge dice rolls, or give into unreasonable player demands at the table. Rather it means keeping your focus on what the players want to do in the game as opposed to what you would like to see them do.

This especially rings true in preparation. There have been countless times when a GM has sat down with his players, having prepared a nice little adventure for them, only to have them do something completely off the wall which derails all that preparation. We hear about these things happening at the table all the time, and true enough, they happen at my own. It's part of the game. You have to learn to roll with it, because it's never going to change as long as you believe in not restricting player control over their characters.

This is where the sandbox style really shines, however, because you are providing a world with which the players interact, and the choices they make should always matter. Resist the urge to railroad players into certain situations. Present the adventure hooks for them, and let them take it in the direction they choose. This is going to require improvisation on your part as a GM, but if you're remotely considering sandbox style play, you must accept the fact that you will likely be improvising...a lot.

Make the world around your players a living and breathing thing. There are NPC motivations outside of what your players are involved in at a given time. Their characters can't be everywhere all the time. Maybe they have a few options in the beginning, but they won't know the results of their actions until things are played out. For example, they have option 1, which is to raid a nearby set of ruins overrun with undead, or option 2, which after some investigation by the players, results in their foil of an assassination attempt. If they pick option 1, don't forget about option 2, and let the consequences of their choices take place. Let that major NPC get assassinated because the players didn't take that hook.

Know your world, and write down notes on events surrounding it. These don't have to be detailed pages and tomes of useless information that may never come up in play. Just a series of simple bullet style notes, preferably keeping it in line with your campaign world calendar. Those particular events in which your players actively chose not to participate in, should happen. The ones in which your players took the bait of a hook should be saved and the results determined by their actions in the game. Doing this, they will quickly realize that their actions have consequences, and will respond accordingly.

Ultimately you want your players to have fun, and have a strong desire to return to the gaming table and continue. That's what it's all about. If your players prefer detailed railroady storyline games over an open-ended sandbox style, then give them what they want, or find a group of players whose play style fits more in line with your own. Don't force players down a path they don't want to take in play style, because the results will often be complacency at best, or downright apathy at worst.

2. Stay Organized

I am the most unorganized person you'll ever meet really. My organization skills in general entail trying to remember if I laid that notebook under the bag of Doritos I've been working over, or with a bunch of other notebooks piled on top of my printer. Still yet, I try my best to keep things organized when it comes to the RPGs I run.

I can't stress enough how important it is to have a campaign notebook. For me, this typically means a traditional 3 ring binder with dividers, document protectors, and various useful in-game documents. That said, your campaign notebook can entail a number of different options. Find whatever is best for you, and run with it. If you can keep things organized on a laptop, or on a site like Obsidian Portal, use those methods, but try your best to stay organized.

So, how do I do it? As I said, I have a 3 ring binder I use, tabbed with document protectors. I have a section for maps, random tables and charts specific to the area the players are in, and a section of notes for the game.

I have stated above how important improvisation is in sandbox gameplay. I tend to use a lot of tables and charts which I can quickly refer to in a jam. These include NPC name generator tables, inn and tavern name tables, random trap and trick generators, etc. These are particularly handy because they allow you to focus your creative energies into important stuff, like the game, rather than having to spend mental energy to find a clever name off the top of your head for a NPC or location, which may end up sounding stupid (we've all been guilty.)

In my maps section, I usually keep a handful of maps I have either made, or found online. There's usually a mixture of both. Some of these mini-dungeon areas are keyed, while others aren't, but the idea is to whip one out in a jam when the PCs go off the beaten path. This way I'm not completely caught off guard. I know, for example, in general where my players are on my hex map before each session. I will then prepare a few maps and encounters for various locales in and around those hexes. Nothing too fancy, just enough to give me something should they wander off from what I perceive to be their goal at the time. Best of all, I can always use those maps in other areas later if need be.

The notes section is probably the most important section of the notebook. I have a campaign log which I keep, an item spreadsheet which lists who has what item, where they got it, if it's been identified and the items known and unknown properties. I also keep a small chart to document xp to help me calculate everything at the end of a session.

My campaign notebook is like my GM bible for the game. A good, well kept campaign notebook, will bail you out of sticky situations, and just make life easier for you as a GM, which in turn, will make things better and more enjoyable for the players.

3. Don't over-prepare

Don't spend too much time in preparation, and stick to things that will directly involve your PCs. Do you really need to write up 3 or 4 paragraphs of notes on a temple or inn your players may never visit? Improvise many of these things. Stick to what's important for the upcoming sessions. Yes, this can be, more or less, a fly by the seat of your pants method, but that's the fun of the sandbox. You're discovering your world along with the players.

When I start a new campaign, I like to take a hex map, key out several locations of interest, without detailing them too

much, a brief set of notes on major NPCs in the area, and their motivations, various secret groups and organizations, a very brief overview of the political climate of the area, etc. These don't have to entail hours upon hours of needless preparation. Just a few notes, allowing you to focus on really preparing the important stuff, like areas your players might explore. Throwing up a few one page dungeons to get things going is a good idea.

It's very easy to find yourself spending hours preparing for scenarios your players may never encounter. I've done it myself, and in many ways, it's simply unavoidable, but try to limit the time and energy you spend on your campaign into what directly involves your players in the current session. Trust me, some of the best moments at your table will come through improvisation and just winging it. Just ensure you take good notes (or keep a campaign log as I mentioned in point 2), so you can keep things organized.

Some of these methods may work for you, some may not, and many of you are probably already implementing these methods in some form in your own games anyway. There simply is no absolute best way to GM. It would be a pretty boring world if that were the case. Still yet, we all have techniques and experiences to draw upon, which can make the job of GMing easier if we actually take the time to read and learn from others.



Building a Better GM

by [Alex Schroeder](#)

Hm, thinking back on how other games are being run in the area, I think that first and foremost I am a good host.

- I actually run as many games as I can manage instead of just talking about running a game. The worst way to run a game is to not run it at all.
- We have no kids that require our attention, my wife also likes to game, we have a big enough living room and a nice gaming table. No matter how hard you try, it's going to be harder if family members need to sleep, babies need attention or the table is tiny.
- I pick dates for months in advance, use Google Calendars and send friendly reminder emails. This takes energy and discipline. If the weather on Sunday is damn hot and I'd rather go for a swim in the lake—no can do. I promised to host and that's that. I'll try very hard to make it happen.
- I try hard to resist changes to commitments made. If one player out of five can't make it, that's unfortunate. Starting an email discussion discussing alternatives risks confusing and annoying everybody.
- People will learn that I am dependable. I am a rock. When I am dependable, others will be as well. Avoid uncertainty and doubt.

When I was a teenager, a player told me that he loved my scenarios. There was always great scenery. These days, reading about Planet Algol or Vornheim, I feel humbled and don't feel like I can claim great creativity. But I can claim something else: I improvise well.

- When I returned to role-playing games in 2006 and to D&D 3.5 in particular, it did not take long for me to realize that I desperately needed to save prep time. I decided that preparing one hour for a four hour session was the most I was willing to invest.
- Even if running D&D 3.5 or Pathfinder, I stick to this rule and make up the rest. I don't fiddle with stats. I either use a monster from the monster manual, or I make up plausible stats on the spot.
- I don't plan where the campaign will go, but I always have around five plots on hold waiting for the players. Sometimes I'll advance or end plots because by choosing to ignore the appropriate plot hooks my players are telling me that they don't want to pursue these plots.
- I may not know where the campaign is going, but I have a pretty good idea of where it went in the past. I usually maintain a Campaign Wiki for every campaign. This helps me remember stuff that happened and allows me to improvise motivations, events and NPCs that fit into the greater picture. This also imbues past events with more significance and helps the suspension of disbelief.
- This last point warrants emphasizing. I may not prepare a lot before running a game, but I certainly will think about it a lot after running a game. (I called it postparation in jest back in 2009.)
- After six or ten sessions, you will need to prepare less and less, because you already prepared dungeons and

towns and hex maps for previous adventures. You can return to old locales, old acquaintances, old plots and keep on adding detail. The lizard patrol you met is looking for the old lizard druid that you defeated a few sessions ago. The sage you seek knows how to unlock the portal you saw a few sessions ago. The pasha tells you to fight the blue dragon that took your magic items a few sessions ago.

- I make sure my players have a map of the region. As they explore, they get to add new places and people to the map. Having the map in front of them allows them to remember past events and makes it easy to point somewhere and go back to places they have already seen and visit people they already met.
- By picking up past events, places and people multiple times, the world seems to be rich and solid. I don't have to improvise all the time. Whatever I improvised, I will take note of it after the session.

And lastly, I am very tolerant.

- I am willing take a lot of shit before kicking people out of my games. I don't want to suffer a lot before making hard choices but I am often amazed at how long I am willing to make excuses for other people.
- I will run games in German or English as required.
- I will take the time to introduce people to the game at their own pace. I will make sure that more experience players don't push inexperienced players around and I will not be impatient. Instead, I will offer them two or three smart moves to make when their turn comes up.
- When I don't understand how players behaved at the table, I talk it over with my wife. Seriously, getting an outside perspective is important to me. Am I imagining things? Am I overreacting? I need to find a benevolent explanation for what they said or did. I don't want anger to build up.
- I'm not good at confronting people. This is something I need to work on, maybe. Here in Switzerland confronting people involves losing face, even though everybody claims that this is what one should do.
- I can handle all player types at my gaming table even if I have my preferences.
- I am willing to use different rules. In fact, I am curious about different rules. I have tried D&D 4, Archipelago, and everything in between. I am interested in all systems without having developed Gamer's Attention Deficiency Syndrome. (I try to keep system purchases down and rarely switch campaigns to different systems just because something new and shiny has caught my eye.)
- Be benevolent, understanding, patient, curious—and firm. Make it a point to work on your social skills.

So, there you have it. I am a lousy encounter builder. I don't use terrain a lot. In fact I like my combat to be very short. I don't like thieves, I don't like traps. I spent a lot of time learning the D&D 3.5 rules and know them well, and yet I can't make character builds that rock in a min-max kind of way. I rarely do funny voices, my setting is vanilla fantasy of the Wilderlands of High Fantasy sort. But the three practices that keep my games running are the following:

1. I am a good host.
2. I improvise well.
3. I am very tolerant.

Being the Best GM Possible

by Rob Conley, [Bat in the Attic](#)

First I read books and watch movies. Both for enjoyment as well as keeping an eye on how they do things. Twenty years ago, I gamed with a guy named Wes and we went to a couple of movies. He was a movie buff in addition to being a gamer and he had a gift for explaining what was good and bad in a film. It was an eye-opener for me and I never looked at movies in the same way again. Afterward I learned a lot of little bits that I incorporated into my game. Mostly dialog and how two actors played off of each other. I also read lots of books and found them a great source of inspiration.

I do this to build up a bag of stuff in my head to pull out while running a game. A bigger bag of stuff means you have more options for when the player talks to the tavern keeper, arrives at royal court, or just stumbles across a peasant's hovel in the middle of the forest.

The key thing is to take some quiet time and organize things in your head. Think about a peasant, an orc, a kobold, etc and then ask yourself a series of what if. There is no right answer and you don't need to be Star Trek's Data and have perfect recall. Do it enough times it will come to you when you need it. This technique shares some ideas with that of the Memory Palace. The best part is that you likely have much of what you need already due to being exposed to fantasy and other genres over the years.

Another technique is to challenge yourself. Conventions are perfect for this. Run some situation, genre, or game that you never done before. The idea isn't to change your style of play but to broaden your experience. By experiencing different methods of roleplaying you will understand the ones you like better. With Google Plus gaming and the virtual tabletop games there are more opportunities today than ever before to try different games at a convenient time.

For me it was playing and running a LARP game for over a decade. Writing and running adventures for LARPS is stifling. It is because the physical logistics precludes the flexibility of locations, creatures, and items, that you have for tabletop. Despite the limitations I learned to write fun adventures for LARPS and it helped my tabletop game immensely.

Another thing I did was run a dungeon adventure cold. All I had was the stats for the big bad guy, the map, and a general idea that it was a coven of warlocks. I just made it up on the spot as the players went through the dungeon. Knowing that it was a coven keep things from getting incoherent.

Also surprisingly running Tegal Manor. The sparseness of the description, (a room name and maybe a sentence or two) has really forced me to reach deep into my bag of stuff to keep the game going. I always done it with my sandbox campaigns but since Tegal is a funhouse dungeon it forced me to go outside of the things I done before.

On a different note, I been refereeing large groups of players at my Gold Star Anime games. One session I had ten players. This is something I hadn't done since the early 80s so I had to relearn a few things. Once thing I did was figure out how to keep individual initiative. Basically everybody roll for initiative. I roll once for each group of monsters.

In my games the DEX bonus gets added to the die. Fighter get to add their to hit bonus from their class. For monsters I add 1/2 hit dice. So I start at 10 and count my way down calling for anybody who has initiative at that number. I found this works just as fast as doing single die initiative and going round robin around the table.

Split groups don't bother me, I just go round-robin between each group giving them 5 minutes at a time.

There is my How to Build a Fantasy Sandbox for preparing a campaign.

I always have players speak in first person when they speak as their characters. I find it helps immersion.

I do the funny voices, I also practice so I am pretty comfortable doing them. I understand it is not everybody cup of tea.

If you use miniatures, the best thing you do is take all the most commonly used items; beds, tables, orcs, guards, chests, doors, etc and put them in an easily accessible box. I use foam lined bead trays bought from Wal-mart.

Plot in my campaign is a time-line of events that would occur if the players don't do anything. It gets changed (or not changed) after every session to reflect what the PCs did (or not do). I have a roster of NPCs. The creativity comes from deciding how the NPCs react to the PCs.

I try to sit down with each player and do a one on one session to develop their character background. Then incorporates elements of that into the campaign's plot. I make sure there are as many potential benefits as there is potential complications from doing this.

I have way more than the three Hill Canton asked for, I hope you find them useful.

Building a Better GM. A Challenge

by Matt Jackson, [Lapsus Calumni](#)

1. Name three "best practices" you possess as a GM. What techniques do you think you excel at?

A) An idea. I always start with an idea. Stop. Think of one right now. What do YOU want to see in a game. There, got the idea? Use it.

This can be as elaborate as a multi-session complex idea to something seemingly almost too simple. I have ran great games with ideas as simple as "I want a battle on a lake of fire" that panned out to be some of the best games I have ever ran. How do I come up with these ideas? What works for me is classical music or a quiet moment to myself. At one time I was running a weekly game and the evening of the game I would get in my car to drive home from work, put on classic music, and poof! the ideas came to me. This would amount to my prep for the game. Now that I game mostly online, I have to plan a tad more than that with usually a map or two, some tokens...this is actually the part of online games I dislike the most.

B) Know/Listen your players. Know what they like, what they don't. I have a player in my current group that likes a little crunch, I try to throw a little in there for him. Another player just has a crazy strange sense of humor (I'm looking at you Keith), so when he gets his motor revving and has nutty ideas flowing, I roll with it. He enjoys it, that makes me enjoy it, and everyone has a great time. This practice will also help with the one above. When you get to know your group well enough you will be able to drop in bits that you know your players will HAVE to do. Got that player that just cannot pass up the chance for some magic item? Mess with him. Drop in an item that appears to be a magic item but is perhaps possessed, or hates his race, is a cursed item, etc. It will add to the table.

The other side of that slash up there says "Listen" and this is important as well. I recently ran a game with a drug using wizard and in the table chatter the player mentioned something about "giant mushrooms" as he passed a plowed field. In the session I had some goblins that were going to be farmers, normal, plain jane farmers with crops. In a moment of inspiration driven by listening to my players, I swapped out a normal agricultural crop for giant mushrooms. The same player then cracked a witty joke about his character talking to the giant mushroom as if they were alive. So what did I do? I had them snap to attention and follow his orders. The player later remarked that it shocked and amazed him and the scene ended up being one of the most memorable from that game. I had not planned any of that, yet the players made it one of the best parts of the game that night.

C) Think fun and toss the rules to the side. One thing I have done since as long as I remember is that in a situation where I cannot recall a rule, or there is no rule, I always wing it. I make a judgement on the spot that sounds decent to me and I roll with it. Only a handful of times has a player ever objected (he soon left my table) to my rash decisions. I use this thought process to bend rules so that massive fun can be had because that is why I am here. Not to memorize a tome of rules, or a dozen feats, or a hundred spells. I am here for FUN. Period.

2. What makes those techniques work? Why do they "pop"?

Having the right group of players. I have a group now that I have gamed with over the last maybe three years or so, a few of the players have been around much longer than that. We know each other fairly well, we get along, and we are all in it for the fun of playing, the fun of telling a story, and heck, just having a good time.

I guess I kind of explained above why these practices work for me, go back up there and read it. .P

3. How do you do it? What are the tricks you use? What replicable, nuts-and-bolts tips can you share?

The biggest thing I would say is know your group. Know why they are there and find a group whose goals for the evening match yours. There is nothing worse than a crunch GM running a game for a bunch of story gamers, or vice versa.

Do not plan too much, players like to mess with you as much as you like to mess with them, they will only ruin your grand plans. Plan a little, have a general idea of where you want to. I used to say that a gaming session should be planned this way: Know where starting point is and where the destination lies, but not how you got there. The players...good players...will fill in the gaps for you if you have the right group and you know your players.



The DM Challenge...

by Dragolite, [RPG. Rants and Raves](#)

1) Creativity. I am a bit of a frustrated novelist. I have another blog about it here if you wish to read that one as well. However, I do know that I have some creativity. It is one of a few compliments that I have received on my games. I try to focus on what will make this game fun and what might be exotic or interesting to the players and try to bring it in and show them. How do I do it? Well, I read as much as I can. I carry a notebook with me everywhere. Not just to write down ideas for stories, but for games as well. Also, as much as some will comment that the medium is dying, TV and movies are full of great ideas and not so great ideas. Look at something that tickles the DM bell in your head and twist it and turn it around. Ponder on what will make this better. And, ask the next question.

2) Allow for a more free-flow game. I have found that the more the players can seek out and do what they want, they will enjoy it. Have a story, yet don't ever railroad. That is a mantra I think most good DMs have. Let the PCs have some freedom. With freedom, comes action. They will love the fact that they don't have to doggedly continue to go into the dungeon time and again, getting to the point where it feels like punching a time card as they come in and sit down, ready to grind through the next level of dungeon.

3) Learn from your mistakes. I think one thing I have learned in my ten plus years of gaming is try not to make the same mistake. (I know, I am still a newbie in many ways with only ten years of gaming and DMing under my belt, but write what you know.) Some of my first campaigns were dreadful. Nothing but a linear point A to point B progression. I remember there was one game where the players, through a critical and the shouted out want to use a critical hit table, decapitated my main NPC, my Baron Von Badass for lack of a better term (I suggest you look up Fear the Boot and listen to some of their podcasts, they are free and funny!) I was so stunned, I just closed up the book and said we are done. And, I walked away from the game. I learned several things. One of them is that you always need a plan B, and another is to allow the players to kill that big bad. Why? Because and even bigger bad is always going to be out there somewhere. And, since then I have made many many more mistakes. And, I have learned from them all.

I hope that this has been enlightening for you. If not, no worries. Either way, feedback would be great.

The Better GM Challenge

by morrisonmp, [The Rhetorical Gamer](#)

Best Practices:

1. Think about the game All The Time

Now, I don't mean by this that you obsess about the game, have no life, lose your job, etc. What I mean is, the game should be percolating around in your brain all the time. If you think about the campaign once a week for the two hours right before your session starts that week — well, what can you really hope to convey to your players that seems like you've really thought about it? Going on a long car ride with your players? Ask them questions about the game and then don't talk, just listen and take mental notes. Sitting around watching football with other GMs? Talk to them about their games and solicit stories, then just listen. Have a great idea for a scene between a PC and an NPC, write it down and then let it rumble around in your brain. Think about what your NPCs are doing in between seeing the PCs, think about what's going on in the world, think about what makes the PCs tick so you can play to it and off of it. Think about the game all the time.

This has the added bonus of building confidence. If you are brainstorming and thinking about the game — and talking to your players about the game — then you have a better grasp of everything that's going on when a session rolls around and it's time to play it out. Also, talking to your players about the game keeps them invested too... everyone likes to talk about their character and the plans they have for that character. Lots of upside here.

2. Have Fun Too.

This may sound self-evident and even kinda stupid but I've run more than one bad game that basically came down to the fact that I, as the GM, hated the game. Even if the players were having a decent time, I just wasn't invested at all. So you need to be honest about your play. If you are a GM who is never going to have fun running Deadlands, well, don't run Deadlands. If you absolutely love Gamma World but your players are never going to be willing to give it a try — then try to compromise. Run D&D but homebrew up a world that's fallen to a magical apocalypse and re flavor some of your races... Maybe the Goliaths are actually a race of powerful Gorilla Men fighting to preserve their High Mountain Homes from the encroaching Valley Princes in a world where a Dwarven Technology destroyed everything? You get the idea... but if you aren't having fun, the game suffers. It isn't all about the GM's fun — but you are at the table to play the game too, so you deserve to at least share the fun. Some DMs who have the mindset to be Great GMs often forget that because they care about their players. It's a good trait, but if you never have fun, you'll end up a bitter, burnt-out GM.

3. Play to your own strengths (but keep growing)

Related to number two, what I mean is, you probably already know the parts of the game you feel comfortable with — so play to those things. If you are a great improviser, improvise. If you are good at funny voices, do that. If you are a meticulous encounter builder, awesome. Focus on your strengths early in a game/campaign so that you can build comfort and your players will see your confidence. But never lose sight of being better. If you hate, hate, hate, going "off-script" because you are worried about what people will think? Try it a little bit each session — heck, most players won't even realize you're off-script unless you tell them, so just relax and improvise a scene sometime. If it sucked, no big, just try again later. Just like a quarterback with a safety valve, you can always dump off a pass to your tight end if you need too... but if you never throw the deep ball, you'll never be able to throw the deep ball. Terrible sports metaphor — that's what the preseason will do to you...

So that's my three, and I kinda wrapped up the answers to the other parts into my three pieces of advice — so hopefully you'll forgive me for not breaking it down more.

I have one other point to jump on here before I leave. Some of the responses suggested that it is impossible to “teach” DMing. That it’s a talent, you are either creative or not... Some folks seemed invested in the idea that you can’t give DMing advice. I tend to think that attitude may stem from reading so-called GM advice of the sort I mentioned earlier — but that’s my axe to grind, not yours so I’ll shut up about it.

To those folks I say this — Talent is great, but you also have to hone it.

Let me quote from one of the first fantasy stories I read as a nine-year old who was already hooked on D&D but was still learning to love Fantasy...

“I don’t understand it,” she whispered finally. “It — it was like my body wouldn’t do anything I told it to. My mind was saying, ‘Do this! Do that! Do something!’ And my body just wasn’t connected. Sacherell —”

Sacherell was well enough.” Coram yawned. “He’s a bit of a natural. Ye’re just not a natural with a sword, Master Alan. Some are born to it, like me. I never knew aught else, and I never wanted to. Now some — some never learn the sword at all, and they don’t survive their first real fight. And then there’s some —”

“Yes?” Alanna asked, grasping at this straw. She was obviously not born to the sword, and she had no plans of dying in her first fight.

“Some learn the sword. They work all the extra minutes they have. They don’t let a piece of metal — or Aram Sklaw — beat them.”

—From, *Alanna, the First Adventure*, by Tamora Pierce.

This message is repeated over and over again — go watch *The Natural*, with Robert Redford, or listen to any coach talk about their best players... they all might have some talent, but they also watch the most tape, practice the hardest, and devote themselves to their game.

DMing Experience

by RavenConspiracy, [Drawings & Dragons](#)

DMing is the single most important aspect of our games – bad players might ruin games but a bad DM WILL ruin a game everytime.

Prompted by THIS great post; here are things that (when I remember to abide by them) always help me DM.

1 – Prepare for the worst and embrace the best.

Be prepared (emotionally) for your players to ignore or even be absolutely annoyed by your favorite ideas. Understand that your favorite NPCs will probably die like bitches at the hands of annoyed PCs. Learn to let go and move on fast.

On the other hand, sometimes things or NPCs you introduce will lodge in your players imaginations and they just won't let it drop – be ready for this and run with it! Be open to what your players do (and also the wonderful surprises the dice bring for that matter). These moments are pure DM gold!

Basically this is about understanding that your player's interest and affection for game elements must be earned, you can never force them to like a certain thing and the more you force it on them the more they will be distracted and cause "problems".

2 – Run a game you would LOVE to play in and carry this idea to every level of your game.

As often as possible, when you have the chance to make game decisions and interpretations, ask yourself, "If I was PLAYING in my game, what would be the coolest thing to happen right now?" When I remember to do this it always works – you will start running a game you LOVE – and some of that will rub off on your players for sure.

Oh, and remember that this rule is always useable in reaction to anything your players or the dice throw at you.

This especially includes the times when you players ruin or ignore one of your favorite ideas... say to yourself, "Ok... well, what would be the coolest thing to happen NOW?"

This rule is about understanding how your ideas and NPCs work out in the real game space – get used to thinking hard about what a player can or might do when confronted by this element or NPC –> Is it fun at all? Would you like to encounter this as a player? What would your character do in this situation and would that be fun for you?

3 – Give special awards for cool/clever player actions...

BUT give out this award EVENLY to ALL players present. This builds amazing positive energy at the table and encourages your players to build off of each other's ideas without having them worry or bicker about the credit and rewards falling on someone else. It also rewards all kinds of players – remember that the creative spotlight hogging guy is nothing without the straight-men at the table. This has done wonders for my games especially when certain players split up and the thief for example steals something and I say, "Ok, everyone gets 200xp," everyone cheers and behaves more patiently when the spotlight is not on them.

Building a Better GM

by David, [Tower of the Archmage](#)

1. Be prepared. I'm not talking about knowing the rules, or having read through the module you're going to run, that's a given. I'm talking about being ready for when things go wrong. For example in my last session the players managed to take out a dragon in 2 rounds, making what should have been the big tense fight of the night into something that was at once awesome, and yet a bit of a let down. "Dragon" is half the name of the game! It shouldn't be a 2 round encounter. Just... no!

But it happened.

We moved on, and they still got a big boss fight before we wrapped up for the night. Because of the way things went earlier I had an encounter that they skipped that I tweaked on the fly to beef it up a bit, and I dropped on them. It was everything the dragon encounter could have been.

Things are not going to go according to plan. Be prepared, mentally, to go with it.

2. Ham it up. This is Dungeons and Dragons, not Lord of the Rings. You are not a professional actor or writer of works of literary genius, you are a DM. Use funny voices, odd speech patterns, hats, props, and your hands. You don't have to be (or even just look) crazy, but put some life into it. It'll get your pulse going, which will get you more into the game. This will spread to your players, even if they don't get in on the act. My players are almost pure 3rd person when it comes to their characters, but I can tell they respond better when I get into it.

3. Provide options and back doors. This goes back to point 1 - Your players are not following a script, and they especially aren't following your script! Be sure that if you give them a situation that they can get into, they you give them a way out. I'm not talking about a free pass, but if you stick them in a room without any doors, windows, or anything else, no one is going to have any fun. Give them a door, but make it cost whoever opens it. If they've been stupid, maybe it costs a hand. Who's going to sacrifice a hand to let everyone out?

A Challenge: Building a Better GM

by Grendelwulf, [Axe and Hammer](#)

Name three "best practices" you possess as a GM. What techniques do you think you excel at?

1. I like to teach. The game exists to provide entertainment on an ongoing basis. It is specifically aimed at a group of players to interpret the campaign and bring it to life. I endeavor to present my prepared game material in such a way that every player can learn and understand quickly. I try to keep it simple. Explain it, but keep it short and to the point. I find most players want to learn but they want to use what they have learned. If I ramble on and on or am difficult to understand, the players will start to tune me out ... and very likely miss out on information that is offered during play.

2. I like to learn. The game is constantly undergoing modification through game master and player interaction. My players are free-willed and always have a multitude of choices from which to proceed. Anything can happen. I cannot and will not preordain how the events in my campaign will unfold. My games are flexible and are subject directly to and indirectly by the preferences and actions of the players and the PCs.

3. I am the Game Master. I do my best to remain disinterested while retaining my power as final arbiter. It is a part of my role as game master to challenge the players and their PCs. To do less would only lead to boredom, chaos, and the eventual end of our enjoyment of the game. I am not the players' adversary. I am not a "Killer-GM". I simply like to present them with the joy of a challenge. Nothing too easy (at least, not actually if it may seem so), and nothing absolutely invincible (yet knowing when to run away and return when one is more readily prepared is also something which must be learned). I always allow for a chance at success, even when it may not be one I have anticipated or foreseen, as long as the players willingly and enthusiastically confront all the challenges that have been placed before their characters. They have seldom failed to surprise me.

What makes those techniques work? Why do they "pop"?

I believe these "pop" with my players because they know I respect them. They know I will not give them easy answers and paint a wide, yellow-bricked road for their PCs to follow. They are able to attempt anything they can imagine, within the realm of the game system we are using, and know they can expect absolute fairness from me. They may succeed or fail by their actions. They know I will not "hold their hands" and I am not "out to just kill their PCs".

How do you do it? What are the tricks you use? What replicable, nuts-and-bolts tips can you share?

I just do it. Play honestly. There are no tricks.

Okay, as it has been previously said (particularly in the comments of the challenge post at Hill Cantons), one cannot teach Creative Force. What works for one gaming group may not necessarily work for another. However, this does not mean that a game master cannot learn anything from another.

What tricks do I use? Is preparation a trick? Is research a trick? I have a love of many authors and their works. Likewise, I have enjoyed many other forms of media: comic books, movies, musicals, operas, etc.

All of these experiences have given me something to use in my games. For example, I have a veritable cast of

thousands to choose from whenever I create NPCs. How such characters are presented to players is very, very important for the "believability" factor. If you make a cardboard cutout Dudley Do-Right or Snidely Whiplash, the players are going to treat them as such, ridiculous parodies. Unless the game system you are using demands the use of such constructs, they can certainly shake serious players out of the "atmosphere" of the campaign you are all building.

Be attentive to your players themselves. What books, music, movies, etc. do they like? If you are using a game system that already reflects the type of environment given in those forms of media, your work is only partially done. You then have to keep it from being boring, as some overly popular genres can become. If you are using a system unlike what they find enjoyable, then you must think of ways to incorporate aspects of them into your game. Take it down to the nuts and bolts. Is it just action/adventure of any kind, or does it have to be fantasy, or superheroes, or sci-fi?

Some players like hack and slay. Some players prefer the mind-bending challenges of tricks and traps. Some players just want to role-play a tale of unending heroism against all of the dark twisted forces of chaos to free the world so that peace and beauty may reign forever. Then again, sometimes you get players who like to experience all of these (oh, the horror. The horror). The better game master must know when and how to balance these desires.

The more all of you game together, the better game master will be taking note of how the players and their PCs react when confronted with certain situations. The players will also be seeing how you, the game master, play out these situations. Are you running all of the NPC barkeeps with the same accent? Do the city guards always behave the same way towards the PCs?) Do your players say things like, "Oh, here's another guy we have to bribe for information...", etc. The players will also see if you are in the habit of bending the rules, whether it be in their favor or against them. Don't do it! Be consistent. Sure, new players may grumble at first, but so long as they see you treating everyone fairly it will cause less distraction in the game.

Be creative. Do the unexpected! Prepared modules are fine if you need them, but be ready to take them and twist them and turn them into something entirely new at the roll of the dice. In fact, nowadays, it is entirely possible for your players to access many of the same gaming modules you yourself may have been preparing. Think of ways to roll "outside the box". Your players will thank you for it later.



Adventure Game Mastering

by Stuart, [Strange Magic](#)

Here are the 3 things I think make a good GM and which I try and keep in mind when running a game.

Fair Play

As a Game Master you may also have written the scenario, but that's not your job as the game master during the session. Once the game starts you should try and be as impartial as possible acting more as a referee than "omnipotent benevolent dictatorial storyteller". If you are leaving something to chance, then roll the dice in the open so everyone can see it was left to chance. If you aren't leaving it to chance – just say so. Don't change the statistics for the monsters, locations of the rooms, or add / remove elements to "keep things interesting". If you are using a map and key, let the players know that. If you aren't using a pre-generated scenario... let them know that too. It might change what the players spend their time on, and it's only fair they aren't wasting their time.

Meaningful Choices

The second best practice is making sure the choices the players are presented with make a difference. Don't ask them if they order beer or ale in the Inn if it doesn't make any difference to anything in the game. Don't ask them if they go to the West or East if you intend them to encounter the Evil Wizard regardless of which door they choose. Rather than railroad your players or present them with false choices just narrate whatever you need to setup the scenario and then give them real freedom around the choices they make from that point on.

Adventure Roleplaying

Of course fairness and meaningful choices might not be important if you're running a game about improvisational acting or storytelling, or a game where the adventure is just the fluff between the "fun" of detailed tactical miniatures combat. However if the game is about the adventure itself then you should also be making sure there is a balance between the different things that make up an adventure. Tactics and deep in-character acting should only be a small part of that while exploration, mystery and solving a variety of problems they encounter along the way becomes the focus.

GM Merit Badges

What would be great is if GMs had merit badge style indicators of not only what they thought they did well, but also their general philosophy around how to run a game. Knowing two GMs are both running games of D&D is less important (for me anyway) than knowing that one believes in letting the dice fall where they may, while the other believes the dice shouldn't get in the way of telling fun stories with interesting and long-term characters. Even if you'd be happy to play in both games it would be good to know this stuff ahead of time.

Being a Better DM: Blair's Version

by Blair, [Planet Algor](#)

1) Read Jack Vance.

2) MASH – Keep the game moving; keep things fast. Make up a ruling on the spot instead of wasting everybody's time looking stuff up and heming and hawing. Get the viking hat on and steamroll the game forward. If there's a rules lawyer or whiner in your group that's cramping your style, '86 them. If a player isn't paying attention or listening and keeps holding up the game let them know that you're always right, to get their shit together, and MASH on through/over them. If someone is holding up the start of the game while fussing over naming their character or buying equipment have everybody at the table STARE at them and let them know that they're being an asshole.

To quote from Savage Worlds, Fast Furious and Fun. I persecute and harass and implement punitive houserules to get the players to the sessions by a reasonable time. A guy who plays in a buddy's game keeps hinting that he'd like to play in my game; he always shows up to my buddy's game hours after everyone else, there's no way I'm going to put up with that crap! I wasn't happy to do this, but I had to ask a friend to leave my game because he couldn't keep up with the other players. It was nothing personal, but he was holding up the game and I MASH.

3) Be Unmerciful. You forgot to buy torches and you got separated from the party? Well, I guess you're fucked. Nobody wrote down the 5,000 gp gem? Well I guess it was lost. You didn't write down your XP from last session? Well I guess you'll remember next time. The dice say your favorite PC just ate it? Well I guess this is goodbye. You rolled a crap set of ability scores? So did I for my Red Box Vancouver character, and that PC is one of my favorite characters; deal with it. The point isn't to be a dick, the point is so that people are engaged, pay attention, hustle, and have to be so in order for their PCs to survive and thrive.

Believe me, when I'm DMing I'm a combination of Nethack, Captain Bligh, Larry David and Kali. I revel in mayhem, confusion, and horrendous death. But I don't do it to be a jerk or fuck over players; I do it because I love my players and I love my game, and have too much respect for both of them to play kindergarten softball. This isn't World of Warcraft, this isn't T-ball, this isn't Chutes and Ladders; this is Dungeons and fucking Dragons, so you damn well better hustle and sweat and think and pay attention in order to keep your character's head above water blood.

DM Best Practices

by Telecanter, Telecanter's Receiving Rules

Here are some practices I don't think anyone mentioned yet and that I think are essential to my game and that I'm good at.

1 Describe Combat

For old school play the randomness of the dice is essential but sometimes puzzling. It's your job as DM to meld these into some sort of sense. Especially in combats. You are in the best position to do this because, unlike players, you have to pay attention to what everyone is doing, you have a sense of what the monsters look and act like, and you have a sense of what tone you want to give players (isolation, desperation, victory). So, I do these things:

- describe hits and misses for both sides
- every few hits/misses back up and reiterate what has happened
- leave critical hits and misses to my own judgement (no charts) so I can come up with whatever ridiculous or awesome things fits the context
- if players make a great suggestion run with it as always
- I learned to elicit some description from players by being DMed by Tavis, but I don't want to put too much of a burden on them and (for the reasons above) I'm usually better equipped to evoke the scene as a whole. I do try to ask spell casters what their spells look like because a) that seems very personal, and b) I can reuse that over and over with slowing the game down waiting for a player to be creative.

This isn't just for combat either-- missed saves, made saves, reaction rolls, morale rolls-- you are the interpreter of the randomness of the dice.

2 Don't Worry about Time

The single thing that kept me from DMing for years was worrying about how to keep track of rounds, and when to roll for wandering monsters, and when a torch will go out, etc. But I remember now, watching Tarzan movies on TV and trying to see if I could hold my breath as long as he could. Invariably, there would be a cut to a commercial, a cut to a scene happening elsewhere, a flashback, whatever. Tarzan underwater time was not literal time, we, the audience could forget about it to focus on something else for a bit and then be reminded of it with dramatic music and underwater closeups. My D&D is just like that. It isn't a simulation. Time is emotional. Time is narrative. Some specifics:

- If I forget to roll for wandering monsters then other interesting things were most likely happening and it isn't a big deal.
- If I suddenly remember, "Hey, it's been a while since I rolled for encounters," then there is either a lull in action or, more likely, players are dithering about what to do next. A fight to remind them of the danger of the underworld is just what's needed.
- If there's a dramatic time for a torch to go out, a spell duration to run out, especially if players mention it, then I might roll to see if that does happen.
- Now I realize that players need info to make decisions and I am always striving to come up with simple systems that will, for example, give them a better sense of when their torch will go out. But for now this works and quite well. fast paced, tense and dramatic.

3 Try to Engage All Your Players

I don't see myself as a distant arbiter of rules, a neutral judge. I'm there to have fun and see everyone else having

fun. The rowdy, confident folks that turn out to be natural party leaders are not a problem. It's the person visiting and playing for the first time, the shy person, or even the person tired from work. So here are some things I try to do.

- I ask folks being quiet to roll initiative for the party
- I ask quiet folks what they are doing. To make sure they aren't talked over and forgotten.
- I'll have characters with little to do (the 1 hp MU who's cast his spell) make rolls for hirelings or npcs in combat
- If I roll a wandering monster I tell the quiet person that they hear something
- I give one session visitors a perk and try to make them essential to the session
- I try to make sure the players know their options "What was the spell you memorized PlayerNoobie? Oh, you're saving it, cool, cool."

In a nutshell, the last thing I want to see is a player huddling in a corner of the couch, quiet and bewildered.

Here is a fourth for good measure.

4 Don't Worry About the 4th Wall

If breaking it is fun, do it. This I learned from Jeff Reints. My hireling traits chart can result in some real doozies: hirelings with no feet, bearded women, slobs and pervs. It turns out players quite enjoy rolling to see the results. So, I let them do that during the session when they get hirelings. Other mechanics like pulling Jenga blocks or rolling a big d30 or whatever, if it adds choices, adds excitement, adds fun it gets added. I don't worry so much about ruining the player's sense of disbelief. The right mechanic will oddly make them more engaged. This all works better if you subscribe to my rule 1, because I will rewind a little and then narrate what the result of the goofy mechanic means in the game world, and this probably goes a long way to re-immersing everyone present in the shared daydream.

Other than that I'm not sure I have specific points for this practice.



GM Challenge Best Practices

by Tsojcanth, [Lost Papers of Tsojcanth](#)

Ckotalik over at the Hill Cantons asked every GM's three best practices. I wrote an almost answer years ago because, you know, I can see the future. But I want to give better answers this time around, and the. Or try at least.

1. Strip mine your surroundings for ideas and turn them into archetypical subverted caricatures. I really really like creating NPCs out of people by making them a subverted caricature of the original to make them into a different entity. The same can be done with anything else: places, events, items. Caricatures magnify what's important about the entity but the subversion gives it deeper, interesting shades. For example. I need a merchant city, so I pick Dunbarton, put it in the middle of Genoa and make it ruled by a never-seen immortal queen and her secret police. When I needed a shady broker I took my dad (a salesman) and gave him a gang of thugs. My demihuman races have Italian regional accents, but have magnified idiosyncrasies (my halflings are more halflingish than yours, and speak Sicilian). Filthy Phil (a really stinky ragman and garbage-sifter in my current setting) is inspired to... well, I like dumpster diving (the best stuff you can get is free). The beautiful thing is that you can do this on the fly in games: players usually are fascinated by deep NPCs and they think deep NPCs must be important hence worth their time. oftentimes they just like them, especially if you play gonzoish adventures. Which gives me enough time to actually link them with the rest of the setting in (you guess it) subverted caricatures of existing relationships.
2. Evolutionary game elements rock: the reasoning is that of the 10 campaign elements (npcs, odd objects, etc) you introduced in the last settings, players will pursue maybe 2. They will pursue the most interesting, because they don't care about the others. So if you improvise you can just come up with a good/boring element ratio of 1/4, the players will kill the bad ideas by not caring about them. The morale is: stop fretting about the quality of your improv, just care about players' feedback. If you only come up with amazing ideas, the players will pick only the most interesting so, instead of having gold and platinum in your game, you'll have only platinum. Of course this works only if you are not a control-freak railroader. There is only trying, diversity is king, survival of the most adaptable and so on.
3. Play with your players: the game is yours, but players live in it. I suppose you don't hate them, so your goal is to have fun with them, not at their expenses. I'm not saying to indulge in monty haulism, but if you have a choice between doing what you want and doing something that your players find interesting (and doesn't irk you), go for the second one: players will feel engaged (read point 2 above) and they will steer the game for a while, giving you overworked GM time for thinking about other stuff. It works best when a player goes like "I wonder if Mr X is obsessed with orchids because of an ex lover or something" and you apply point 2 and yeah, it's because his mom loved them and he has an Oedipus complex. If your bud Dan feels super-good when his PC saves a young girl and gets closely but not necessarily sexually involved with her, you have a major player driver in your arsenal that you can use every time without fault: remember to apply subversion from point 2 above to keep things different. More in general, Intuitive Continuity works extremely well, if you don't need to have your ego fed at every step of the game.

In general, I favor player centered design: it works with software, why not for D&D?

Jury Duty (Better GM Techniques)

by JB, [B/X Blackrazor](#)

I'm not sure I can provide specific nuts-and-bolts technique for each of these, but I'll talk about each and how I attempt to do it. As with any art form, practice helps.

Know the Rules. For a traditional RPG like Dungeons & Dragons, the GM is God, Jesus, and Umpire all in one. It doesn't help anyone do anything if you don't know how to play the damn game. Players want to sit down and play...their level of interest in knowing the nuts-and-bolts of the game mechanics will vary; some will want the knowledge to "game the system" (optimize in-game effectiveness), some will just want to know what dice to roll when (and some won't even care to know that much). Regardless of player knowledge, YOU as GM must know how the game runs, backwards and forwards. If there are tables and obscure rules and such that you can't be bothered to memorize, you should still be able to find this info quickly in the book and have a good basic grasp of the game play. If you're lost, you can't run an enjoyable game; it doesn't matter how creative you are!

"GAME" is the operative word in that last sentence...you can still run a collaborative story-telling session, or narrate players down your particular linear ego-trip. But if you want an interactive game, then you have to have rules, and the GM is final referee and arbiter of these rules.

Knowing the rules of the game allow you to be an effective judge and referee; it allows you to be an effective teacher of the game and mentor to the players. It allows you to be consistent in your presentation of the game which, in the final analysis, is the closest thing we ever get to "fairness" and "game balance."

Finally, knowing the rules, being a subject matter expert on the game, gives you the freedom to move onto other issues...like #2 (Encourage Role-Playing) and #3 (Balance Hard & Soft) listed above.

Encourage Role-Playing. I'll be blunt here. If you're running a role-playing game, you have a responsibility to encourage role-playing...no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Real role-playing (imagining yourself in the role of your character, making your character's interests your own) is the main thing RPGs have that other games (including computer "RPGs") do not. Those of us who have the privilege of running a game have the responsibility to the hobby to showcase this side of the game whenever possible.

Why? Because it's the thing these games have that others don't; it's the draw that brings people to the game. It's the thing that can keep the hobby going...a hobby that encourages imagination, social interaction, community building, and critical thinking. A hobby I'd like to see last beyond my own limited time on this planet.

Encouraging role-playing means giving the players the chance to think as their characters and not making the game too mechanical. Even when it IS mechanical, one should be able to provide the rationale to explain things in terms of character for the players.

Why can't my cleric use a sword? Because the spark of divinity within all creatures rests in the blood, and it is a sacred thing to the Gods, not to be spilled except in very specific rituals at the proper moment of sacrifice; the very creation of a blade used for the injuring of others is antithesis to the tenets of your faith.

I want to throw dust in the eyes of my opponent and then hamstring him with my dagger? Make your attack roll (watches); okay, your roll failed. You scoop up dirt and throw it in your opponent's face, but it appears he's no stranger to this tactic...he sneezes but still anticipates the blow, blocking it with a downward parry.

Can we negotiate our way out of this? Yes, but unless you speak lizard man it may be difficult, though perhaps one of the creatures knows a bit of the Common tongue.

Role-playing comes about when players begin to think in terms of their character's desires, and this happens the more they can place themselves in the imaginary world of the game. "Shutting them down" and telling players they can't do something because it's not in the rules puts the focus of their game squarely ON the rules; which in turn de-emphasizes the identification with character. It's difficult enough to experience suspension of disbelief at a gaming table when one has to occasionally break the 4th wall to call for an initiative roll or saving throw. Encouraging players to try different things or "think outside the box" not only makes the game more fun and less boring/rote, but will help the imagined world to live and breathe for the players. Do it as much as possible.

Looking players in the eye and practicing active listening is more important to role-playing than speaking in funny voices.

Balance Hard and Soft. The trickiest of all three practices, and definitely one that's fairly specific to the role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons; I'm speaking specifically to fairly balance risk and reward for players in-game.

Gygax (and Moldvay and Mentzer and everyone else) has written about the need to find balance in the rewarding of characters in-game; that pendulum swing between "too stingy" and "Monty Haul" type campaigns. For me, the treasure/XP factor is secondary to finding balance in the challenge that's handed out to the players. And by "challenge" I mean "threat to (imaginary) life-and-limb" not just "solve the puzzle."

I like the games I run to be deadly. I want there to be a real feeling of threat in the minds of my players when I sit down at the table. I want them to believe that they are risking their character's lives every time they step into the dungeon, that it's possible they'll get energy drained, or poisoned, or smashed in a cave-in, or over-run by goblins and speared to death. I don't want them to think that there's some safety net/dice-fudging thing that's going to happen and save their bacon if they press their luck or blunder into the wrong corridor or fail to screw up through ignorance or possibly bad luck.

Why not? Because, to me, that's what D&D is about. It's not about coming up against Great Old Ones and being driven insane. It's not about Antediluvian vampires that can kill you with a glance and have no need for game stats. It IS a game about heroic individuals undertaking perilous adventure for both gold and glory.

"Perilous" means deadly. But that doesn't mean characters don't get saving throws...player characters ARE heroic, after all. Both purple worms and greater demons can be fought and killed by Joe Human in the D&D game, and sure Joe will probably bite the dust, but it's not guaranteed. Sometimes dumb luck can be an ally in the game...just as it is in real life.

However, with that threat of deadliness (or poison or petrification or energy drain) ready to pop out at any time, and the consistency of the DM with enforcement (the "Hard") you create a more visceral experience for your players. Assuming you're following #2 (encouraging role-playing), players can feel real adrenaline and racing heartbeats when the shit hits

the fan.

[otherwise, they may just think you're an asshole]

However, the trick (as I wrote) is balancing the Hard with "the Soft" and that means knowing when to give on something, allowing the PCs to survive or overcome an obstacle in a manner or method not otherwise anticipated by the DM. A PC is poisoned and the players use a potion of gaseous form to dump the foreign substance from his body. PCs rig up an elaborate method of getting a treasure item without setting off a found trap (rather than attempting to disarm said trap). Allowing PCs to negotiate with monsters or find "outside-the-box" methods of overcoming obstacles and environmental hazards (White Plume Mountain is a good adventure to practice this kind of DM/PC training). Allowing escape. Allowing capture for ransom. Allowing unusual methods of recovery as rewards for certain benny side-quests.

And definitely allowing REWARD to match the risk. If the PCs overcome a huge threat, give 'em a huge payday. I gave PCs a 4000+ gp piece of jewelry for overcoming a single gargoyle...but they were 2nd level with only a couple magic weapons between 'em and gargoyles can only be harmed by enchanted weapons. On another adventure a PC landed himself in jail for asking around town for a controlled substance (poison) and blowing a reaction roll. He was allowed to escape (with a healthy bribe to a guard); later, when the party overcame a giant snake, he was able to milk the thing's poison sacs for a couple doses.

When players are innovative and creative, reward them. When danger comes a-calling don't coddle them. Give them the hard and the soft with a lot less "lukewarm." These make for a better player experience. And if you can deliver that, then you are on your way to becoming a better GM.

My Only Pro DM Tip

by Aplus, [People Them With Monsters](#)

I still consider myself quite a noob when it comes to being a DM, so I don't have three table tips to use in response to Hill Canton's GM Challenge Thingy. But there is one that I actually came up with all by myself that seems to work well.

Have players roll their own wandering monster checks.

Not necessarily the ones that happen every fixed number of turns, but the ones that come about as a result of their actions (or inaction).

For example, I usually have a failed open door check trigger a wandering monster check. This actually gives meaning to the failures, and makes it worthwhile to attempt to pick a lock when possible.

Also, the most important one is when the party is standing around in the dungeon while the players are debating a course of action at the table. More than just a little of this, and I ask them to roll a wandering monster check as a result of their bickering in the dungeon corridors.

This lets them know that they need to keep things moving both in game and out.

The Building a Better GM Challenge

by Timothy, [Unbidden Thoughts from the Underemployed](#)

What should a good GM do – what should his or her practices be – in three steps?

1. It is laudable to over-prepare; it is lamentable to over-plan.

This could be an entire argument in and of itself, so please allow me to limit this to the detail I will provide in the following paragraphs. One of the traits a good – meaning functional – GM is to be prepared to run the game, by which I mean the system. This does not mandate that a potential GM needs to lock him- or herself away and study the mechanics as though a proper understanding would enable him or her to pass the Bar Exam. It does, however, mean that the GM should have a mastery of the basic rules and if not a knowledge of the more complicated concepts and mechanics, than any easy reference to them (say, like a GM Screen with various rules printed on the inside). Nothing does more to draw everyone out of the experience than constant rules referencing. Some rules referencing is unavoidable, if only to settle questions between players about how some situation is resolved, but knowing the rules helps the GM attain and maintain the position of authority at the table. After all, he or she is the ultimate arbiter of what happens in the game.

That is not the extent of preparation, but the beginning. It better serves a GM to prepare as much of the game world/universe as is practical before the actual playing begins. I note "as practical" because fully fleshing out the world/universe can lead to a restrictive outlook from the GM and a constricting environment for the players. Fully developing the game environment before the players have any level of input falls squarely in the camp of over-planning, and that will be addressed later. The prepared GM has more than an idea of the setting, but rather has a concept that can be well described and explained to the players in a consistent manner.

The game world/universe is not just an empty box into which concepts can be plugged, but a vibrant entity that has a life given to it by game play. As such, the game world/universe needs to be able to meet not just the vision of the GM, but also fit the expectations of the players, and accommodate both the backgrounds of the players characters and the consequences of the actions taken by said characters. Preparation allows the GM to exercise a more consistent mien and the freedom to be creative within the established framework, thus not bringing about unintended moments of parody or absurdity.

Over-planning, on the other hand, prefigures the actions the player characters will take. It established a plot-line which the players must navigate in order for the evolving story to make sense. In actuality, over-planning diminishes the evolution of the story; the only changes that end up happening are the ones that either allow for lost player characters to return to the regularly scheduled plot or – in extreme cases – to abandoning the ruined story in favor of a simpler one the PCs can't help but follow. Over-planning is not only restrictive – for all parties involved – it can also lead to resentment because the value of choice is trivialized when the GM adheres to the planned scenarios.

Being prepared means being able to handle the rules, the world, and the PCs' choices affecting what is happening. Over-planning means anticipating the actions of the PCs and plotting out plot lines and story arcs for the players to follow. One allows for interactive creativity, the other for creativity (maybe) forced upon the rest of the group.

By means of example, I would point to a brief Vampire: The Masquerade (3rd Ed.) chronicle I ran titled Dallas: By the Light of the Silvery Moon; I believe it lasted somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty sessions. I had a spiral notebook with 300 pages of notes, maps, and stats for the anticipated NPCs (and that was just for Dallas proper). I would acquaint myself with the notes between sessions, updating them with what the PCs did, who they met or influenced, and

locations visited. I would then review where the last session left off – and what may have been left unresolved from sessions prior to the last – and have a loose plan for the introduction of the night's session. The players would take the game in whatever direction they pleased, oftentimes scary and wholly unanticipated, but I could react to them in a responsible manner because I had prepared for as much of the game world as possible and knew the rules backwards and forwards.

The opposite of this would be an AD&D 2nd Ed. campaign in which I played where, regardless of anything the players wanted to do, the PCs were moved from location to location towards some eventual goal that – lo and behold – was instead accomplished by an NPC (so that the players couldn't screw it up). Yes, that is an extreme example of planning (and plotting) out a story and sticking to it, but many GMs still indulge in this to a larger degree than necessary. It ruins spontaneity (or at least reduces the impact of it to nothing) and kills the cooperative aspect of evolving the story the players and GM are experiencing.

2. Know your players; know their characters.

I am sure this is a subject often brought up and with many different points of view, but there is such a person as the problem player. The first step a GM should take, when taking inventory of his or her players, is identifying whether any of them are of this breed. The problem player is oftentimes, but not solely, one whose primary goal at the table is to foster some sort of discord among the characters. This is a problem that cannot be easily solved once it has reared its ugly head, in part because the problem player has exposed him- or herself as a person who has little regard for the other players' enjoyment of their characters.

My recommendation – and one that it took me a good long while to adopt – is to view each potential player as an applicant. Are they well suited for play with others? Some players come right out and let the GM know they enjoy playing characters who are disruptive. This has happened to me four times in the last three months (they were looking to get into any type of home campaign), and in each instance I let them know the following. I would not ask them to join an established group I had (they seem to want to disrupt a functioning dynamic), I would not want to start a new group for them (as they have expressed that they aren't interested in building a good group dynamic), and that I find that approach to playing very immature. This is not a process that is simply limited to when a player enters the group, but one that should be revisited whenever a conflict seems to arise without legitimate cause. Players should likewise be consistently evaluating the GM to see if he or she is delivering the kind of experience the group – and individual players – want and deserve.

Once the group is established, it may seem more than a little difficult to consider removing a player from the group. It should be, but it should also not be the first resort to conflict. If the GM has taken the time to become acquainted with the players, it should be easy to have discussions with the players about the problems that arise during play (it is my position that the GM should not take on the responsibility of managing real-world relationships of the players; such a proposition would require the role of GM to pay extremely well). Still, problem players are like a cancer for a game group, and if they cannot be treated with a discussion of what led to some early conflicts, they should be excised from the group. Likewise, players who are unhappy with the role their GM has taken on – oftentimes in regards to the level of responsiveness to the players – should first have a discussion about their disappointment with the GM, and, if the problems continue, leave the GM (which may also mean leaving or ending the group).

Knowing the players has more benefits than being able to identify problem players and taking early action to resolve conflicts at the table. It allows the GM to have a better grasp on what these players are looking for in the gaming

experience. This is not an absolute – I played in a Dungeons & Dragons 3E campaign at NIU where the GM and three of the players all favored combat over roleplaying sequences, but only one player was disappointed when we did back-to-back sessions without a fight (and the GM was the happiest person of all!) – but it is a great place to start to get an idea of what kind of experience the players expect.

Knowing the player characters is a little easier, but in order to do it correctly one must have some kind of understanding of the player. I think many GMs are against the notion of the broken character. I am against the disproportionately powerful character, but that can often be regulated by some simple instructions on character creation at the beginning of the campaign; for example, not allowing mega-heroes in Heroes Unlimited. On the other hand, I find it a little high minded for a GM – especially when it's me – to tell a player he can't make the kind of character he or she wants to play. The only question is how to accommodate the type of character into the world – and this is where preparation again comes into play – which is easier if the GM does not have an overly restrictive view of what belongs in the game world/universe.

Knowing the characters means being aware of their motivations and their capabilities. This enables the GM to interject (personally or emotionally) meaningful moments for the player characters into the game. It enables the grander story to blend in various elements that would otherwise be disparate appeals to individual character desires that become known only in retrospect. The more obvious aspect of knowing the player characters is that challenges and encounters can be properly proportioned to be – or appear to be – risky without being over- or underwhelming. Knowing the characters makes preparation much easier, and can reduce the desire to over-plan.

3. Remember that it is your game, too.

Being a GM is not just about being the world and its reactions to what the player characters do. Ultimately, the GM is another player at the table, and one who deserves as much of a chance to enjoy the game as everyone else. Just as the GM shouldn't reduce the amount of influence the other players have in the story, he or she shouldn't feel that they can't add their voice and contributions to the story and setting. Table top roleplaying is a cooperative experience, and while the GM is weighted with the authority of being the final arbiter, he or she has to find a way to be an equal in terms of having a good time. Luckily, many GMs find pleasure in how a good story unfolds, and how players take unexpected routes and find novel solutions to the resolution of the challenges in the game.

As a GM, one of the things I like to do is create tiny rewards for those moments where the players surprise and impress me. These oftentimes have little more in-game (mechanical) effect than what the player characters may have acquired on their own, but I make every attempt to tie them to the moment, the character, and the overall story. I have had a fair amount of success doing this, but I also know that there are players for whom it does not do much.

I apologize for not being able to fully articulate how to exercise a level of participation in the game that does not rise to the level of ownership nor sink to a level of being subservient to the players. I do know that it is very important to find this level of balance. This may seem to go against the notion of the GM being the one who gets to choose who is fit to sit at the table – that is an inconsistency I cannot easily resolve, either. Maybe the easiest solution to this is to make sure that enjoyment can be found in various ways, and that there is more of a need to allow to exercise caution when exerting the powers available to the position of GM.

Building a Better GM

by Rubberduck, [The Vocacious Wright](#)

David over at the Tower of the Archmage pointed to my attention to Ckotalik's post about Building a Better GM. So I thought I'd throw my towel into the ring.

Specifically, what he wants us bloggers to do is

1. Name three "best practices" you possess as a GM. What techniques do you think you excel at?
2. What makes those techniques work? Why do they "pop"?
3. How do you do it? What are the tricks you use? What replicable, nuts-and-bolts tips can you share?

1. Allow the players to be awesome. Maybe one of your players wants to jump on the ogre's back and ride it like a rodeo bull. Maybe he wants to run along the back of the dragon and jump off its shoulder to get to high ground. Maybe he has convinced the friendly troll to throw him, and wants to fire crossbows akimbo while flying through the air. Just because the rules doesn't say how to do this, doesn't mean you shouldn't let him.

That doesn't, usually, mean that you should just let him automatically be successful. Look at the rules, and find a roll or two he can make. Set the difficulty depending on how suited the character actually is for the stunt, and how much you would like to see it successful. That rodeo ride could be resolved through a series of strength checks. The dragon-run could be a dexterity check or an acrobatics check, depending on the system. The akimbo crossbow flying might be simply attack rolls, with some negative modifiers.

If the character succeeds, there will be high-fives all around, and the players will talk about afterwards how awesome it was that time Bob the Elf surfed a shield down the stairs while shooting orcs left and right. If the character fails, that gives the opportunity to throw in some nice complication or other, heightening the tension, and making the encounter memorial anyway through the failure of the stunt. A GMing success either way.

2. Steal with hands and feet. There is inspiration everywhere. Movies, books, songs, roleplaying anecdotes, setting backgrounds, documentaries, everyday events. If you stumble across something that is cool, keep it in mind. Then once you have the time, consider how you might use it. If it is obscure or ubiquitous enough you might be able to use it outright. Otherwise it might just take a bit of tweaking. Or maybe it is purely inspiration, and only the core essence remains once you are finished with it.

The refrain of this little number for example inspired me to have a short adventure revolving around a relative of a player who fell in love with ice fairy, and would freeze to death if he stayed with her, and go mad if he didn't.

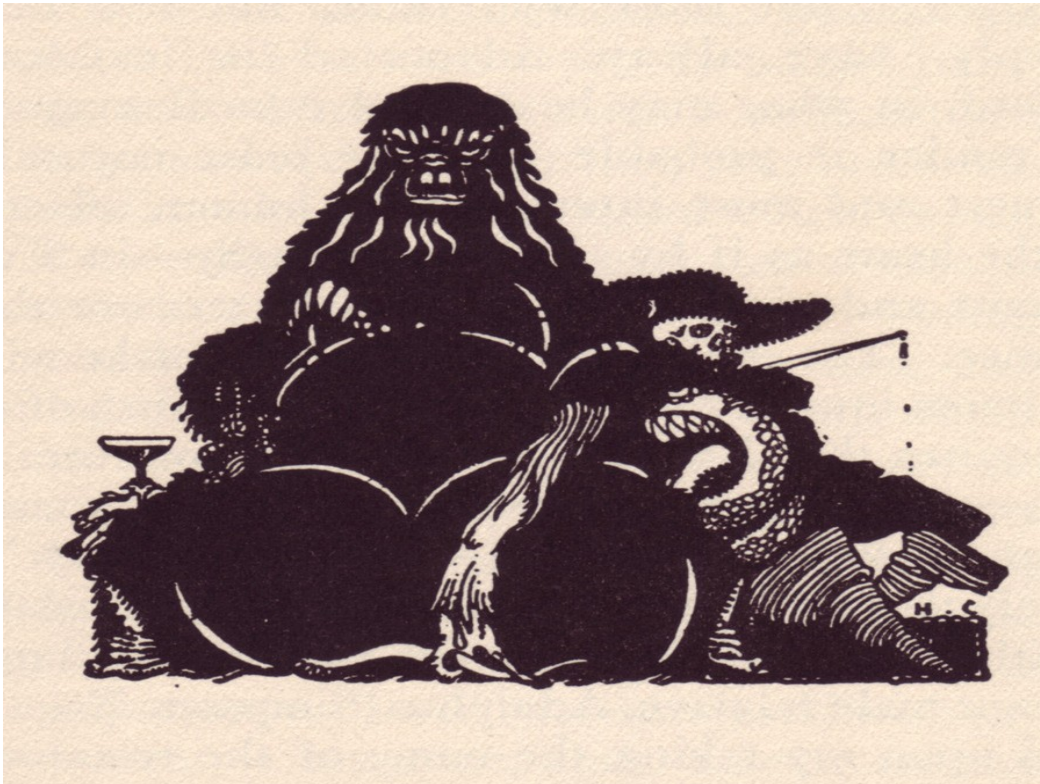
The world is filled with creative people, and you can't possibly be as creative as all of them combined. So when someone has come up with something cool, use their work. That way you will seem ten times as creative as if you had to come up with the stuff yourself.

Not only that, but it is filled with incredibly and cool real-life stuff too. Sometimes truth is, if not stranger, then at least as strange as fiction. Monsters, cultures, places, events, and much more can be found on wikipedia or in books or documentaries. If you use all that as well, you'll seem twenty times as creative, and your setting might seem more real to boot.

3. Don't cling to your plans. This is related in some ways to the first point, but writ large. While you may have plans, for the adventure or for the entire campaign arch, you should always be prepared for the fact that the players may have other thoughts. Don't be afraid to make it clear that this was the adventure that you had planned for tonight. But also, always make it clear that there is no pressure. They can choose to do something else, if they would rather not do that adventure for some reason.

This also means that you have to be prepared for that straying off course. There are two general ways to prepare. Preparation or improvisation. Generally I myself try to have a little something prepared, if I suspect the players might decide not to bite the plot hook. Not a lot, because most likely it won't be used, but enough that I have something to base my improvisation on if that becomes necessary. Having some other adventure hooks, with general ideas about what those adventures would be about, is a typical trick.

Being always prepared to drop your adventure keeps you from forcing the players down a path that they really don't want to take. Your players won't thank you if half of them lose their characters assaulting the dread necromancer's fortress, when what they really wanted was to leave the country from the moment they heard about him



Building a Better GM Challenge

by [*Fleur du Mal*](#)

Quite coincidentally, I've been thinking about pretty much the same thing the past couple of days.

Name three "best practices" you possess as a GM. What techniques do you think you excel at?

1- Know the damn rules. You don't have to have them memorized, but you have to know them well enough to be able to be internally consistent when you makes rulings on the fly – and those rulings really need to cleave to the combined spirit of the rules themselves and the campaign you're running.

2- It's a sandbox, not a sandpit or a litter box. I used to steal shamelessly from anything at the drop of a hat. Now, while I still steal shamelessly, I take the time to make sure it "fits" into both my DM-style and my campaign world. As a result, players feel free to run with their own concepts, knowing that I'll work with them to make sure it fits rather than being stuck with a dead-end idea or concept.

3- I only just realized this a little bit ago, but I also think that what makes things work is being evocative. People are coming to play in your sandbox. Not just any old sandbox, yours. Make it your own, make it different, make it identifiable, give it a soul all its own. It doesn't matter what that is, just let it be something you enjoy and are comfortable with.

What makes those techniques work? Why do they "pop"?

1- The players will trust you. The rulings will "make sense" and enhance the game rather than bog it down. Plus, when you understand the rules, it lets you understand why the world wants to act in a certain way – because you understand the "grand unified theory" behind it all.

2- Understanding that a sandbox still has conceptual boundaries. Knowing what they are (for me) lets me relax and let the world do some the work itself. For example, my world has firearms and magic (plus things in the middle like darters), I know that why they exist and how they both fit. I can extrapolate, on the fly, from my "base principles" and make things up that I don't have to shoehorn in later and explain away with handwavium.

3- It aids in the suspension of disbelief that is needed for TT RPG's. It also softens the blow of bad things happening to characters and makes the goods things that much sweeter. It's not a "magic shortsword" it's "The Sword of Kas". Players feel like they are in a world that they can do things in, where they can have an effect on things – which is, ideally, a spur to their own activities.

How do you do it? What are the tricks you use? What replicable, nuts-and-bolts tips can you share?

I read a lot. Fiction and non-fiction.

I role-play – both as a player elsewhere and as the voice/face of all the NPC's in my game world.

I let players win. Yes, you can win in this game. My current players can hear about the stories of old characters who have now passed into the myth and legend of the world. Some of my current players played those legends, some of them have had the opportunity to meet those legends. Some characters win by "failing" miserably, and having to be put down by the rest of the party – and as a result live on in infamy...

I'm not cheap. I don't really care that much how much magic players have (either item's or powers). There is always a bigger elephant. I have yet to give a player anything, in 32 years of gaming, that I couldn't bypass, steal back, destroy, or otherwise render ineffective if I wanted to. Most of the time I don't care, and it's a great way to reward players for success at whatever it is that they have decided to do.

I have a similar attitude about character level. I really don't care, I think that the process of leveling up is fun and important, but I've run really fun low-level games and I've run really fun high-level games – if people are having fun, who cares? I have yet to run into a character with a level so high I still couldn't say, "You explode" in response to a comment of they made in passing regarding the NPC they were interacting with. (and I did that once running a BYOC game at GenCon – nobody else blinked, they just healed him up, and the game went on).

I make sure I'm having fun. If I'm not having fun, my game suffers. That means my players suffer. So I have to make sure I'm having fun. I can look and see the times in the past where this was not the case, and I can see the effect it had on my game...

I have a well-designed, well-balanced world with lots of detail but enough blank spots and fuzzy edges that I can always add something new if I need or want to. The world isn't there to trap me, or trap the players, it's there to give us all the opportunity to tell some great stories based on the actions of the characters and how the dice roll.

Yeah, stories. If you don't want to tell stories, play poker. This doesn't mean there has to be a pre-determined narrative arc, but everyone likes to tell the story of what happened afterwards and brag about what they did. As the DM, give them some stories to tell! And please, most people don't want to spend lots of time talking about how many of their characters have died trying to survive in your world.



Build a Better GM Challenge – Unemployed Geek Edition

by Joshua “DocStout” Brown, [the Unemployed Geek](#)

...Gamemasters are part narrator, part referee, and in most systems the ultimate arbiter of the world and how the characters the players have created can interact with it. Good GMs provide the players with an arena for drama and set the stage for telling their own adventures. Bad GMs enter into a competition with the players, one rigged in their favor. Everyone who runs games has their own strengths, and weak points, and some of the things that make the greatest GMs are talents, that cannot be taught. Others, however, are teachable and learnable skills.

1. The Balance.

The first thing that I feel I do well in my home campaigns is careful attention to a balance between two elements of gaming that sometimes interfere with each other. The “roleplaying” and the “game.” I’ve been a player in campaigns where one is emphasized to the neglect of the other, and personally, those sorts of games aren’t fun for me. Taking either element to its logical extreme conclusion and you have something that most people wouldn’t find fun. All game, no roleplaying sacrifices theme and story for tactical combats without context or meaning, die rolls determine life or death, effective tactics minimize risk and there is a simulation-level resource management. If a “character” dies, it doesn’t matter, roll a new one and get back in there. All roleplaying and no game makes character decisions only meaningful in the context of interpersonal relationships. Combats are loosely scripted affairs with no reasonable risk of death unless the player is clearly choosing to make a noble sacrifice, and a trip into town may involve hours of conversations with shopkeepers and locals, making the game more an exercise in collaborative improvised storytelling.

The first example is how many of the first tabletop roleplayers played, evoking the wargaming roots of the hobby, and the second is the rule for online forum roleplay. I do not mean to say either of these styles are worthless or that one is inherently superior to the other. It isn’t a choice of one extreme vs the other, with the very best gamemasters, a blend and balance of the two has created the best gaming experiences of my life, and I strive to pass that on to players. In general, I make combats meaningful by making the vast majority of my rolls behind the screen stand, and if I need to fudge a roll, I do so very rarely and without letting the players know. I fudge rolls if and only if allowing random chance to stand “as rolled” would make the experience less fun for everyone. A spectacular critical hit from a nameless henchman putting a hero into an early grave scenes before he confronts his personal nemesis might be fudged, but ignoring dice rolls too often makes them all meaningless. Don’t be the GM who bends rules to pound the PCs into the dirt, and bends them again to let them win. Players know when you are doing that, and resent it.

2. Roleplaying is a Group Activity.

I’ve been in a lot of games where there’s that one player who insists on creating an obstinate character whose personal goals and outlook frequently cause chaos and dysfunction within the team of other players. I’ve seen GMs throw their hands up in frustration, not knowing what to do, and a table full of uncomfortable players. After all, the player is “just playing my character, doing what he would do,” so no one can fault him for it, right? Bad advice in this situation labels this individual as a problem player off the bat and recommends eventually asking the player to leave the group. Sometimes, this is regrettably the case, but I’ve found that such extreme measures are rarely necessary. I’ve corrected this with a particular speech I give at the beginning of most of my campaigns. The “Group Activity” speech has been given so many times that my regulars don’t even need it anymore. It is understood.

Basically, I concede that no one can fault someone for playing a character honestly and accurately to their core concept.

However, fault can be found in the creation of a character whose outlook and goals will inevitably create conflict and strife, and whose personal philosophy allows for no growth as a person, compromise or change. Roleplaying is a group activity, and the fun for a single player of creating a situation that is all about a clash of their characters personal ideology and goals with the rest of the group should not trump the fun for the other players in that group. An understanding that conflicts within a team may naturally arise as characters develop is one thing, and can provide great scenes if played by mature players resolving a difference of opinion. Making a character who is unsuited philosophically or psychologically to belong to a group working toward a goal is not appropriate for a group activity such as roleplaying in all but the rarest of circumstances. Players in my games keep that in mind before the first word or number is written on a character sheet.

3. Plan to Improvise.

“No plan survives first contact with the enemy.” Every GM who has assumed players would go a certain direction and they immediately seized on the opposite one knows this. Some respond by railroading the players and seizing the illusion of control of their own destinies from the player's hands. This is not fun. One of the strengths of tabletop roleplaying is being able to determine your character's fate, and do what you want, rather than following someone else's script. Knowing that the players will knock you for a loop now and again, a lot of preparatory work can be done to shore up an individual gamemaster's improvisational weaknesses. I have a list of names ready that are unassigned to any NPC so when they introduce themselves to a throwaway NPC I create on the spot, they don't immediately know that character is unimportant as I struggle for a name off the top of my head.

So long as the player group has a concrete goal to work toward to avoid a paradox of choice, and whatever a GM might need to make up, but would personally struggle with on the spot is prepared in advance, there is a lot of fun to be had with letting the players have some control over the flow of the action. Have a few villains statted out, maybe a few maps of locations to be dropped in ready, focus on having the hard stuff to make up on the fly in front of you, and making up the rest by the seat of your pants is easy, and a lot of fun. The limits imposed by a pre-written scenario are gone, and the story can flow purely based on reactions to player decisions.



“ I HAD WALLED THE MONSTER UP WITHIN THE TOMB ! ”

Building a Better GM

by Tim Shorts, [Gothridge Manor](#)

The three questions blend together so I will sort of answer them all at once.

1. I like to take the stereotypical, allowing the players to go on assumptions and then twisting it, sometimes subtly and sometimes more extreme. This is a great technique I use in my fiction and it works fantastic for gaming. Maybe the orc that is tromping through the forest is not a 1HD easy target. Maybe it's a 5HD orc/troll with regenerative powers wearing the Charm of Gruumsh that grants any weapon it uses to paralyze. This is a deadly example, but a good one that plays on players' assumption. Everyone has the monster manual, but GMs have to remember those stats are just a suggestion.

What to watch out for: Making everything unusual so in doing so you've made the unusual the usual. It's okay to have a horde of goblins for the players to slaughter. That's fun too. A GM needs to set up the situation so that the twist will work.

2. I am very good at winging it. I think this is probably one of the most important skills a good GM can have. I think the best adventures are ad-lib and some nice surprises for the GM as well as the players. Of course to be effective the GM needs a solid knowledge of the system. Ad-libbing is cool, but also I think needs to be done in moderation. A foundation and consistency needs to be established. Some people who have the entire world, cultures, history and geography memorized then it's no big thing.

What to watch out for: Like I mentioned the biggest problem with too much improvisation is inconsistency. Too much and it's difficult to keep track of motivations and people and things and places because you made them up on the spot. Keep good notes or at least have a good outline/structure that you use to keep things from going too wonky.

3. I think what makes me a good GM is I engage the players in interesting story-lines. There is often several running through a single game at any one time and some are the main story arc for the characters and some are those side quests or path splitters. I like to weave a lot of layers and build a complex relationship to the world they're interacting with.

What to watch out for: Over complicating things. Players love to develop their story-lines and will often complicate it enough themselves, GMs need to allow them that privilege. If things slow down a bit the GM can always interject some new interesting twist, but if your players are anything like mine they create enough drama to last several sessions in one sitting.