

# TAKING THE NARRATIVE BY THE TAIL:

GM INTRUSIONS & SPECIAL EFFECTS

BY MONTE COOK





# GM INTRUSIONS & SPECIAL EFFECTS

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GM intrusions are the moments for the Numenera GM to really shine. When used properly, you absolutely have the players' attention, each person around the table hanging on your every word, waiting to see what's going to happen. Like the twist in a movie's plot, or a heightening of a novel's tension, when a GM uses one of these very special moments, it's time to give the story of the game something very special. But how do you use this feature of the game to its fullest?



## WHAT ARE GM INTRUSIONS FOR?

First and foremost, it's important to understand that GM intrusions are the primary at-the-table tool for GMs to participate in helping to craft the story that the group is creating. In the same way that a player contributes by stating what her character will do as her action, a GM intrusion is the GM's action. It's the GM's contribution to the ongoing events to make things more interesting.

A PC's action is probably driven by two motivations: playing the role the player has created, and succeeding at the goal the PC has in front of her. GM intrusions are driven by a different motive. They're not based on the PCs' goal one way or another. They're not meant to be an action taken to prevent the PCs from reaching their goal (although they might result in that happening, that's not their purpose).

The GM intrusion is motivated solely by making the story more interesting. These "intrusions" represent the natural course of events outside the PCs' control: the rest of the world, fate, luck, and so on. In the past, such things have been solely in the purview of often cumbersome rules for NPCs, weather, the environment, and so on, as well as the widely open-ended realm of GM fiat.

It's also the replacement for the GM's traditional role of rolling dice. It's certainly a different mindset to get into from other games, I'll admit, but rather than use game

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*The Numenera corebook discusses GM Intrusions in detail, with a number of examples. I highly encourage those interested to read or reread that section before reading this glimmer. Numenera corebook, GM Intrusions, pages 325-328*

mechanics to determine if the pursuing abhumans get through the door that the PCs have just barred behind them, the GM uses GM intrusion to have it happen when it would be most appropriate for the story.

That's what most GMs do all the time already. A *D&D* Dungeon Master says, "now the door breaks down and the orcs come through" when it feels right, not when a game mechanic says that it happens (although depending on the edition, there are game mechanics which would determine how long it takes for the orcs to break down a door). And that's fine. It happens so frequently we kind of don't even recognize it. Deciding when and if things happen is what GMs do. *Numenera* just formalizes and encourages it.

Why? Because it makes for better stories. There are things that GM intrusions can allow for that would never happen in a game without them because there would never be rules or die rolls involved. Imagine that the

PCs are going to talk to the King and Queen of *Iscobal*. They enter the audience chamber and proceed to the throne. The GM intrudes and says that the nano in the group trips on the end of the rug, stumbles, and lands on her face. What happens next is crucial. Does the nano recover with aplomb? Self-deprecating charm? Fluster? Anger and embarrassment? Her reaction will completely shape the way that encounter goes, and it would never happen without the intrusion—it's a routine action without the need for die rolls, and there's no incentive for the player to initiate the fumble on her own. So the GM has to do it. The GM intrusion just formalizes the event, and even gives the players some XP to soften any at-the-table resentment that might mistakenly arise. (Plus, what better thing to award experience points for than having to react to a unique experience like that?)

*Iscobal, page 158*

Throughout this supplement, you'll see page references to various items accompanied by this symbol. These are page references to the *Numenera* corebook, where you can find additional details about that item, place, creature, or concept.

## WHAT GM INTRUSIONS ARE NOT

GM intrusions are not a way for an adversarial GM to screw over PCs or players. They are not a means of punishing players. They are not the means to make PCs constantly fumble and look like idiots—despite the example above.

In fact, a GM intrusion doesn't have to be something bad. It might simply be something that takes the narrative in an unexpected direction. It can be a door opening to lead the character to a completely different solution. Or it might appear to be something bad, but if the PC reacts well, it might end up being beneficial. Or it might just be a surprising turn of events or a reveal that no one expected.

*For some GMs experienced with other systems, a good rule of thumb might be that whenever you get the urge to roll dice, it's time for a GM intrusion.*

## EXAMPLE GM INTRUSIONS

Here are some ideas for GM intrusions that you can use in your next game. These examples supplement the list on pages 328 and 329 of the *Numenera* Corebook.

### USE ANY TIME

- A loud crash/yell of pain/cry for help is heard nearby.
- One of the PCs' cyphers begins to beep out a mysterious code.
- A dangerous storm blows in, with high winds, torrential rain, and lightning.
- An unexpected encounter happens—a beast suddenly shows up on the road, an ancient automaton wanders around the corner, a lost child grabs the PC's leg, etc.
- A surprising fact is revealed—the shopkeeper is a spy from another land, the hollow tree is full of angry bees, the water is actually flammable oil.

*For GMs with good narrative instincts, a good rule of thumb might be, any time you think to yourself during a session, "You know what would be cool?" That's an opportunity for a GM intrusion.*





*Ithsyn, page 241*

- A trap is sprung—a trapdoor opens beneath the PC, the device malfunctions and shocks the user, an *ithsyn* suddenly leaps from the tall grass.
- A partial success—the PC climbs up the hill, but knocks some rocks down on her friends.
- Something materializes out of thin air—an ultraterrestrial carnivore, a time-traveling cube, a phase-shifting vehicle, a portal to another planet, etc.
- Someone of importance makes a surprising and probably inopportune appearance—PC friend, relative, enemy, lost companion, etc.

## INTERACTION ENCOUNTERS

- Someone uninvolved with the discussion arrives with important news.
- Wardrobe malfunction—someone's clothing comes undone, tears, or otherwise becomes inappropriate, too revealing, or simply very wrong.
- No decorum—someone belches, gets physically ill, or suddenly realizes he has a real odor problem.
- Faux pas—someone says precisely the wrong thing, which might deeply offend another.
- Flirtation—someone takes the interaction a step too far.
- Rules are rules—an obscure rule or strange law prohibits the NPC from speaking on the topic the PC wants to talk about.
- Interruption—the person the PC is interacting with is suddenly called away on another, unrelated matter.

## COMBAT ENCOUNTERS

- Someone/something uninvolved with the fight shows up suddenly and looks to get involved.
- The foe is not what he appeared to be—a human-like automaton, an abhuman in disguise, a long-lost relative of the PC, etc.
- The force of the opponent's attack pushes the PC into a pit, through a doorway, into the strange machine, etc.
- The PC realizes that there is something about the foe that indicates he must be spared—he's holding a fragile valuable; he apparently knows valuable information; if he's not immediately placated, he will bring doom down somehow, etc.

- The fight causes unintentional damage—the ceiling, the floor, or a nearby wall collapses, the nearby machine explodes, an innocent bystander is harmed, etc.
- The foe reveals some surprising ability or item that gives him some advantage in combat (that advantage might be the ability to flee to safety).

## ITEM MALFUNCTIONS

Not all GM intrusions, even those triggered by a 1 on the die, should be “fumbles” or “malfunctions.” A GM intrusion can be anything that potentially changes the course of the action or the storyline. However, sometimes a malfunction is in order when the GM intrusion involves the numenera. Here are some suggestions:

- The device triggers its effect on an unintended target.
- The device's effect is, if possible, reversed. A restorative effect becomes damaging. An attack becomes something that aids or heals.
- The device's effect is triggered, but in an unexpected or undesirable way. The user is not in control of the device. A belt that grants the ability to hover sends the wearer careening off in a random direction, probably to crash into a wall or the floor. A ray emitter fires wildly or explodes. An injector sprays its contents into the user's eye, causing pain and temporary blindness.
- The device explodes, inflicting damage equal to its level to all within immediate range.
- The device reaches out telepathically and obeys the commands of a creature other than the user within long range.
- The device inexplicably sprouts metallic, spider-like legs and scurries away, never to be seen again.
- The device negates gravity in immediate range for one round.
- The device releases a pulse that stuns everyone in immediate range for one round, during which they can take no action.
- Energy feeds back into the user, who suffers damage equal to the device's level.
- The device and 1d6 other nearby devices are permanently depowered.
- The device loses all power, but another device within long range gains extra power.

*One way to increase the impact of a GM intrusion is to give players a chance to anticipate what's going to happen. Slowly sliding XP cards across the table, playing a certain sound, or using some other “tell” can heighten the tension of the dramatic moment and get everyone fully engaged.*

*A GM intrusion doesn't always have to affect the PC directly. If a mistake is made during an interaction, consider having the NPC make the mistake instead of the PC. That creates an unexpected situation which could lead to interesting results.*



## SPECIAL EFFECTS

Like GM intrusions, special effects (when a player gets a 19 or a 20 on her die roll) are a time when someone at the table takes the narrative by its tail, if just for a brief moment. It's a chance for the GM or a player (or, ideally, the GM and a player working together) to add a flourish with a real effect on the action. Each focus in the Numenera rules has a couple of suggested special effects, because whenever possible the effect should be tied to the action at hand. Sometimes, however, a few ideas for general-use special effects can come in handy. Use this list to generate some ideas.

## MINOR EFFECTS

- Everyone who can see you is so impressed with your skill that the next time you attempt an interaction with one of them, the difficulty is reduced by one step.
- You're so satisfied with your success that the difficulty of your next action is reduced by one step.
- A foe is so intimidated by your prowess that she drops something she is holding.
- A non-ally is so impressed and surprised by your action that he does something embarrassing.
- An uninvolved bystander (if any) who can see you will remember you and your skill.

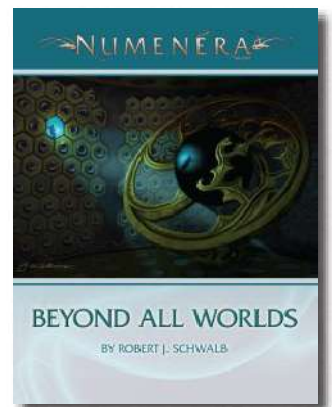
## MAJOR EFFECTS

- One foe is so intimidated by your prowess that he uses his next action to flee.
- Someone thinking about betrayal who sees your skill reconsiders (this one might be appropriate only if the player suspects betrayal).
- Someone who can see you is so impressed with your skill that henceforth, any time you attempt an interaction with that person, the difficulty is reduced by one step.
- You succeed with such grace that you can immediately take a second action, but it must be different from what you just succeeded at.
- You're so satisfied with your success that you can reroll a die roll of your choosing this session as if you had spent 1 XP to do so.

- A spatial warp is created, leading to a place very far away (or another universe entirely). It remains open for only a few rounds.
- The device gains intelligence and telepathic abilities and wishes to negotiate with the user in order to activate.
- All within immediate range are filled with irrational fear for one round and flee at top speed.
- The device fuses with one or two other devices in the user's possession and becomes an entirely new artifact.



*Minor and major effects, page 88*



[Beyond all Worlds](#)

All Numenera Glimmers are also available on [DriveThruRPG](#).

