

Gamemastering

By Brian Jamison



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PO Box 42644
Portland, Oregon 97242
United States of America
Planet Earth, Sol
Western Spiral Arm
Milky Way Galaxy
Virgo Supercluster
brian@gamemastering.info
<http://gamemastering.info>

Digital First Edition

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To Warren. You've always been *my* role model, dad.

Thanks

All the friends I've roleplayed with since the late 1970s have in some way contributed to this book. In particular I'm grateful for the input of Josh and Julia Partlow, Randall Hansen and Angie Lawless. Brothers Jeff and Jason Siadek of Gorilla Games and *Battlestations* fame were also quite helpful as was Martin Ralya formerly of TreasureTables.org.

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Introduction

I used to struggle as a Gamemaster. I'd ask myself, why does it take so long to come up with a new adventure week after week? And why is it that most roleplaying rulebooks, despite being hundreds of pages long, never thoroughly address *how to actually prepare for and run a game?*

Frustrated by the lack of information I looked at the tools used by writers of dramatic fiction. I came across things like *The 37 Dramatic Situations*, a theory that all dramatic situations can be boiled down into just 37 types, and I thought, wow, I'll save huge amounts of time now! But I didn't save any time at all. It turns out I wasn't using the right tool. Tools like *The 37* exist to help *fiction writers* over creative blocks. They're as much help to Gamemasters (GMs) as a butcher's knife is to a surgeon – the tool can be used to get the job done but with ugly results. Eventually I worked out my own techniques through trial and error and stopped looking at the rulebooks for guidance.

In 2003 I again began wondering why there still was no comprehensive “how to” for Gamemasters. To date only a few books have attempted the task with varying degrees of success, and a growing number of Internet forums, blogs, and websites talk a lot about the subject. There is some excellent advice out there but unfortunately, a lot of what I've read seems, well, just *wrong* to me. Backwards. Completely contrary to my experience.

So I wrote this book. These pages lay out one possible way to gamemaster, start to finish. All of these techniques actually *work*. They're the result of over 30 years of roleplaying experience and nearly seven years of writing the book including research, debates, much pondering and lots of trial and error. It now takes me just a few minutes to prepare for a game, and the games I master are full of action, intrigue and suspense.

Many GMs spend too much time plotting out a complete adventure in advance, or buying prepared adventures, skimming their contents, and reading them word-for-word during the game. They miss out on the real fun of dynamic, unpredictable gameplay. *Gamemastering* details a different way to Gamemaster that in my experience leads to excitement and enjoyment unrivaled in pre-crafted settings. It gives you the tools you need to make your game come alive.

Some of the material in these pages directly contradicts the “gospel” of roleplaying. I certainly don't claim to be a perfect Gamemaster but I have strong opinions about what roleplaying should and should not be. At the end of the day it's just *my* opinion. There are as many different ways to roleplay as there are roleplayers. All that matters is that everyone is having fun.

I invite you to approach this book with an eye towards adopting whatever makes sense for you. Chuck the rest.

Game on!

Why A Free Digital Version?

This is the free digital version of the book. If you paid for it please email me at brian@gamemastering.info so I can stick nine kinds of legal stakes through the evil vampiric heart of the perpetrator.

I decided to release this book freely into the Creative Commons for several reasons. Certainly I hope to reach a broader audience. I decided not to even talk to a traditional publisher, mostly because roleplaying stores and hobby shops sadly have almost disappeared, and that avenue didn't seem to make sense. (If you're a big publisher and would like to talk me out of this idea, I'm all ears.) I also believe that putting the book into the commons will help ensure it is available long after I'm gone.

If you like the book, please pay what you think it is worth at the book's website: <http://gamemastering.info>, or buy a physical copy of the book which is available on Amazon.com.

If you'd like to see more work from me in this vein, the best encouragement is to buy a physical copy of the book or pay for the digital book through gamemastering.info.

Who This Book is For

Gamemasters of pen and paper roleplaying games who want to improve their technique, intensify player participation, and raise the experience to higher levels will find much in these pages to enhance their games. This book is as newbie-friendly as I could make it but some parts might not make a lot of sense until you've been a Gamemaster for a while.

Gamemastering is about making roleplaying games more fun and interactive for everyone. It's about making gamemastering less of a chore and more of a creative, entertaining and dynamic experience.

Being newbie-friendly means that some of the material will necessarily be obvious to the experienced Gamemaster. This trade-off was deliberately made. However, part of my motivation to write this book was to improve my own techniques. Writing it made me realize that I wasn't always doing the best or right thing to enhance the game experience.

For the novice, just trust that it will all make more sense when you have more game experience under your belt. We all started as newbies, so don't let the challenges involved deter you from trying your hand as a Gamemaster. It's well worth the effort!

A Certain Logic

The book is laid out in three core sections: one-time preparations, prepping for the session, and running the game session. As a result of this format there are places where I touch on concepts but leave the elaboration of details for a more appropriate part of the book. If you feel like you may

be missing something, trust that it is addressed in one of the following sections and read on. Of course if you still have a question after reading the entire book please email me at brian@gamemastering.info and I will make a note for future editions.

One thing that drives me nuts with a lot of GM material I've read is the huge number of assumptions and lack of examples. (That's two things!) So in most places I have given a solid example or two of the elements of this system and how they work.

The examples throughout the book are boxed like this. For character examples I generally use one by the name of Arlon.

For game universes I use two different examples: a sci-fi setting called *Frontiers*, and *Anneborn*, a traditional high fantasy world.

Why two example settings? To demonstrate that these techniques will work no matter what kind of setting you run - games with superheroes, werewolves, fuzzy animals or cartoon characters, settings that focus on mysteries, historical periods, steampunk, cyberpunk, post-apocalyptic, or present-day. You may need to use a little imagination when the language doesn't precisely match your setting, but you're a Gamemaster and not short of that skill!

Another thing I've noticed about GMs and roleplaying game designers is that we sometimes ramble off paragraphs of "what-ifs" instead of arranging them into nice tables that might actually be useful during prep and game sessions. So wherever possible I've used such tables. You will find them duplicated at the back of the book for quick and easy reference.

The tables are numbered, so while you *could* use them for randomly generating universes, adventures and the like, I strongly recommend that you use your creativity and the information you have at hand to make the best choice, rather than trust the success of the game to luck.

Misconceptions and Terminology

As you read *Gamemastering*, you will encounter lots of common roleplaying terminology and a few specific terms I use in this book. In most cases I define new terminology the first time it is used, but first let's get started with a few important terms that are often misunderstood.

RPG versus cRPG

The phrase "Roleplaying Game" (RPG) has been used to describe many things. This book is about face to face, pen and paper or tabletop (non-computer) playing. That is, assembling friends in the same room and acting out an adventure using nothing more than imagination and perhaps

some paper and dice. While it's possible to play a pen and paper game using methods such as conference calling or this thing called the Internet, we won't be talking about those alternatives here.

Unfortunately, computer games patterned loosely after pen and paper RPGs have come to be known as roleplaying games too. This is a tremendous insult to face to face gaming. It's like comparing watching a movie about hang gliding to actually hang gliding. Both deal with the same subject but offer vastly different experiences. The movie is a carefully crafted experience with no authentic interaction; no matter what the viewers do, they can't change the story. No matter what kind of computer roleplaying game the user plays, the end result has been decided by the game designers long before the user started playing. Some computer RPGs offer more choices and more illusion of freedom, but ultimately, none of them allow total freedom of imagination. Nor can they.

That's what face to face roleplaying is about – freedom. When a pilot straps a hang glider to their back and launches into the air, they are in charge of where they go, how long they fly, and also how well they land. That same kind of freedom exists in a pen and paper RPG. If everyone wants to change the fantasy game into a high tech game, they can. If everyone wants the characters to suddenly morph into intelligent mushrooms, they can do that. The participants are only limited by their imagination and mutual agreement. *Gamemastering* is about these kind of roleplaying games, not computer “roleplaying” games.

Dungeons & Dragons Terminology

Of the thousands of RPG systems that exist I own only a few dozen. Game mechanics differ wildly, and many systems use different terms for what is essentially the same thing. *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*, with all its flaws, is the best known. So in general I use roleplaying terminology from *D&D* in this book. This is *not* an endorsement of that system. For example I use the term *experience points* or *XP* even though many RPGs use different character improvement systems.

Player, Character, GM

Every roleplaying game requires at least two people, one Gamemaster and at least one player.

The *player* is a real person who creates a fictional persona and during the game acts out the desires, actions and reactions of the fictional person as if they were their own.

The *character* (aka *PC*, *player character*) is the fictional persona the player acts out during the game. Although the player plays the character, the character is (usually) not the player. The player might play *himself* but the representation of the player in the game world would still be a character, right?

The *Gamemaster* (aka *Dungeon Master*, *Storyteller*, *GM*, *DM*, *Referee*, *Judge*, *Narrator*, etc. ad infinitum) listens to the desires of the players and crafts a story around those desires. The Gamemaster takes on the role of everyone else in the game universe (*gamemaster characters* or *GCs*), describes settings, and ultimately decides on the success or failure of every action a character attempts. *D&D* uses the term *non-player characters* or *NPCs* which is possibly the worst roleplaying term ever. The phrase practically invites the GM *not* to roleplay! For that reason I use Gamemaster Character or GC.

Critical Differences Between Roleplaying and Boardgaming

A lot of folks play RPGs like they do board games. That is, they believe the GM should either oppose the players or pretend to be neutral. That's understandable, because most roleplayers come from heavy boardgaming backgrounds. And a GM can have a pretty good game using a boardgame-style mindset.

However, I believe that kind of play actively discourages roleplaying. The core of this book is based on cooperative-style play, which in my experience leads to the most fun sessions. I invite you to read this book with an open mind, try the techniques, and be your *own* judge.

First, let's see why competing-style and neutral-style just don't make sense.

Misconception 1: The GM Competes Against the Players

Most boardgames have clear victory conditions. At some point the game ends and there is one winner. Any player not on the winning team loses.

Roleplaying games are fundamentally different – there are no absolute victory conditions. Having fun is the goal, not winning. And while the GM sometimes roleplays GC's that are opposed to the characters, the players and Gamemaster are on the same team.

Gamemasters are not concerned with *winning* in an RPG because the GM knows too much and controls too much for the contest to be fair. If roleplaying were about the GM and players competing the rules would have to dramatically change.

A Gamemaster's job is to make sure the players have *fun*.

Misconception 2: The GM is a Neutral Referee

The decisions of the GM have the greatest impact on the game - greater than player decisions, random die rolls and even game mechanics combined. The GM either knows or determines all opponents, statistics, skills, experience, and modifiers. Even if the GM chooses a prepackaged adventure he must match it to the skill level of the party. Likewise, a GM has great latitude over the timing, sequence, method and intensity of GC attacks.

Gamemasters who want players to roleplay cannot be neutral. This isn't to say that everything goes the way of the players, or that the rules should always be ignored. Gamemasters must create challenging obstacles and present difficult foes. They follow the rules the vast majority of the time, allowing the players to fail. But they protect players from the GM's own mistakes and flaws in the game system. For example, if the GM mistakenly pits a foe against the party that they cannot defeat, it isn't reasonable to let player characters die as a result.

Team, Party, Heroes, Adventurers

Throughout the book you'll encounter the words *team*, *party*, *heroes*, and *adventurers*. They all refer to the group of *player characters*, not the players.

Players, Group, Gang

In the same sense, I use the words *players*, *group* and *gang* to describe all of the players, not their characters.

Game Session, Adventure, Campaign

In this book, a *game session* is an unbroken period of roleplaying, commonly four to six hours long. An *adventure* involves the accomplishment of some clear goal by the team and may take several *game sessions* to complete. A *campaign* is a series of adventures with the same characters.

Commercial versus Custom

Some people love store-bought packaged adventures. But in my experience it takes less time to create a custom adventure than it does to just *read* a commercial adventure, let alone understand it completely. More importantly, what is going to be more fun – an adventure created according to the desires and skills of the party, or an adventure bought off a shelf?

Apart from adventures there are also commercial game settings or universes within which Gamemasters can build their own adventures. Again, that's great. Of course I also think it takes less time to create a universe than it does to read existing material. Most important of all, there is no comparison to the magic and mystery of a completely unknown world. When the players don't know anything about the universe I find it makes them more curious and willing to explore. And the last bonus with using custom material is that the GM can be sure curious players don't buy the same material looking for some kind of advantage.

Suspension of Disbelief

Whenever anyone gets involved in any fiction – by reading a book, watching a movie or play, or participating in a roleplaying game, the participant must be willing to suspend disbelief to really enjoy the experience.

Adults watching a fictional movie start out knowing it isn't real – the actors aren't really in danger and the hero and heroine will win at the end of the film. A lousy movie is so implausible, boring, predictable, or poorly done that we cannot help but disbelieve. In this case the best we can do is to ridicule it a la *Mystery Science Theater 3000*.

A good fictional experience feels real even though we know it isn't. Sometimes these experiences can be much more powerful than our relatively mundane lives. This book is about creating those kinds of experiences.

Imagine a roleplaying campaign as a house that you're building, and a player's disbelief as the storms that try to tear the house down. Part I of this book is about creating a solid foundation that will stand up to the storms of a player's disbelief. The rest of the book is the detail work that makes the house a great place to live.

Part I

ONE-TIME PREPARATIONS

Chapter 1

The One Law

The standard, time-worn method for a Gamemaster to start a game goes something like this: go out and buy a game system, buy or write an adventure, assemble players, generate characters, and start the game.

This is not the best way. Most of the steps are correct, they're just in the wrong order.

Traditionally, the Gamemaster buys a pre-written adventure and foists it upon the players, perhaps customizing it a bit. Or the Gamemaster labors for hours trying to come up with interesting ideas, working out plot and story, then springs the pre-written adventure on the team. The Gamemaster then hopes the players will enjoy the adventure and has given himself little opportunity to change things if they don't.

That's an easy way to have a lousy game. Players *hate* it when the Gamemaster makes all of the decisions. Yet traditionally by the time a player is involved in the game, most of the major decisions – including the story and conclusion – have been made without their input. Is it any wonder why so many games don't last?

The realization of this led me to discover the only absolute Law I know of in gamemastering:

“The more the Gamemaster plots, the less the players will follow the plot.”

It's easy for a GM to escape the consequences of this law – just banish the idea of creating a plot.

Why? A plot is a foregone conclusion. The term comes from navigation. You plot a course to where you are going; your final destination. It's an absolute term; the navigator doesn't plot a course to Antarctica so that the pilots taking turns steering the ship can decide to go to Madagascar because they like monkeys better than seals.

Plotting or scripting outcomes are totally against the spirit of roleplaying! Playing an already-written story is boring for the players because they won't have any input, and boring for the GM because the story is already written.

In fact, any game that has a predetermined conclusion *isn't a game*.

GMs sometimes write a story in advance because that's what they want to do. These folks should write a book/play/movie and get it published or

produced. Likewise, if the players want to act in a scripted environment, they'd probably have more fun with a theater troupe. Those are great activities, but they aren't roleplaying.

Roleplaying *only* works when the players feel they have a relatively free hand to do as their characters please. This is impossible with a plot.

The worst roleplaying experience I ever had was a storyline where the players had little choice. No alternative was given to us other than to enter what was obviously a trap. None of our characters had any plausible reason to be interested and a couple of us were actively opposed to being there, and said as much at the time. Nevertheless, we were led through the scenario like leashed pets. When one of us attempted to change course by leading the party away from the adventure entrance we were literally teleported back. It was misery. Roleplayers refer to sessions like this as being *on rails* because of the absence of choices. Why did this happen? Probably the GM had gone to a lot of effort and didn't want to give up all that hard work.

What happened next? Because we, the players, didn't want to follow the adventure, we occupied ourselves with gumming up the adventure as best we could. We succeeded, but it was a hollow victory. Eventually we all went home feeling unsatisfied.

So you cannot call what Gamemasters do before the game session starts *writing a plot*. This is inaccurate. One might as well call the act of writing a book *typing*.

I'm also not advocating completely winging it. After the one-time act of creating the universe which might take a couple of hours, you'll only need between five and sixty minutes of creative, thoughtful work before the session. I call this preparing or simply prep. This book will help you to prepare only what you need, saving you hours of wasted effort.

Roleplaying is a Shared Experience

Briefly, here's a comparison of two ways to start (we'll cover each step in greater detail later in the book).

Traditional Way:	Better Way:
GM chooses game system	GM chooses players
GM buys/writes adventure	Everyone agrees on setting
Characters are rolled up	GM chooses game system
Start playing	Characters are co-created
	Adventure skeleton is written
	Start playing

Before anything else, the GM should choose the players. The mix of players will make or break the experience. Then the GM should think of a setting he would like to Gamemaster and see if the players share that

interest. If the GM picks a game system without the players' buy-in he might be wasting time and money. If the players aren't interested in the first choice, he finds out what everyone is excited about playing. Then he chooses a game system.

Next the GM should guide the creation of characters, leaving nothing to chance. Characters drive the story in every other form of drama or fiction, and in a roleplaying game it's no different.

Once the characters are created, their needs, wants, and history will almost write the adventure for the GM. The GM doesn't have to guess what the players want because during the character creation process outlined here they've already told him!

I can't emphasize this enough. I believe the GM must involve the players right at the beginning if he wants to have a successful game.

Chapter 2

Choosing Players and the Game System

The Gamemaster is the glue that holds the game together but the players are going to have the largest impact on the fun of the game. A GM should choose his players carefully.

We humans like to categorize things. Categorizing people doesn't work too well, so take this next bit with a healthy dose of reality. There must be a thousand ways to categorize players, and exceptions abound.

Having said that, in my experience players do tend to fall into distinct camps of ideology, style, and rules. In a perfect world, all the players will be in the same camps. In a nightmare world, none of the players are in the same camps and the game goes nowhere.

Ideological Camps: Chaos and Balance

The ideological camp is divided by servants of Chaos on the one hand and those dedicated to Balance on the other.

The Chaos-oriented player will tend towards a rebel, outcast, pirate, lawbreaker, or similar character while the Balance player will choose a cop, bounty hunter, secret agent, or soldier character.

There's no significance to the good or evil of either choice; it's just the way people want to play. Either side can be characterized as good or evil and naturally the character each player chooses to play will be good in his eyes.

It's the GM's challenge to play evil GCs as well as good GCs and every shade between as the story dictates. But a GM who puts a rebel and a soldier on the same team of player characters is setting that team up for failure.

If the GM wants a story to go somewhere, he should have all Chaos or all Balance players. Otherwise the rebels are going to continually gum up the good works of the law, which will lead to retribution, which will lead to ... well, nowhere.

Some great movies build their stories around forcing unlikely characters together: *The Odd Couple*, *48 Hours*, and others. However, players will have trouble over the long run justifying why the good guy keeps hanging with the bad guy.

It makes for better games when the Gamemaster pits non-player characters on one side of the ideology against *all* of the characters on the other side.

Style Camps: Acting and Action

When given the choice, some players prefer talking and others prefer fighting. I call these two sides Acting and Action.

Acting players prefer acting out complex emotions and scenes with lots of PC-to-PC and PC-to-GC verbal exchanges. Combat may well be a part of the adventure, but only if it makes sense for the character or story.

Action players prefer straight combat to talking, and lots of it. These players prefer playing out extensively detailed battles to long debates. This isn't to say that an Action player is necessarily shallow. Most prefer to have motivations for their battles instead of just attacking anything willy-nilly.

It has been my experience that Action players tend to be relatively new to roleplaying, and that more mature players adopt the Acting style, but both styles of play are lots of fun.

These two camps can co-exist if the GM makes sure to devote plenty of time to both types of play. If you have a mixed group don't linger too long in a single session on either style. Neither group will be overjoyed at this, and that is why it is better to stick to one type or the other.

Rule Camps: Storytellers and Realists

Storytellers want the minimum rule-set possible and generally view rules as getting in the way of the story or action. Storytellers frequently come from an acting or creative background.

Realists prefer a system with harder, sharper lines, the better to understand and manipulate the game world. They prefer written rules that cover most or all actions. Strict adherence to the rules, which may include copious amounts of home-made rules or customizations also known as *house rules*, are important to Realists. They often come from technical or boardgaming backgrounds.

While neither of these camps are the only way to play, mixing Storytellers and Realists can lead to strife and disagreement among players.

Of all the camps, this is the one that I've found the hardest to reconcile. I believe it is quite important for the GM to make absolutely sure that everyone in the game is either a Storyteller or a Realist.

Personally I tend to lean towards Storytelling because I like the flexibility as a Gamemaster, but I've run plenty of strict Realist campaigns with extensive rule sets and had quite a lot of fun. I've tried to Gamemaster totally rule-free Storyteller games that crashed and burned, and suffered most painfully under overly onerous Realist game systems.

There is no right way. All that really matters is that everyone is in agreement as to how the game will be played.

'Ware the Wargamer

A subset of the Realist category is the Wargamer. I've considered this carefully and am convinced that wargamers aren't really interested in participating in a roleplaying game.

Why? Wargamers are obsessed with winning, which means others have to *lose*. The more people who lose, the happier a wargamer is. This usually means other players will need to lose frequently for the wargamer to be happy. Wargamers want games to have rigid rule systems with well-defined victory conditions. Fine, except few roleplaying games have these attributes, which means any wargamer on the team is going to be constantly frustrated and will actively sabotage the game.

I recommend leaving wargamers off of any roleplaying invitation list. This is not to say that all people who enjoy wargaming won't enjoy or be able to roleplay, just that the players have to understand and agree that a roleplaying game is fundamentally different from a wargame. We'll talk more about these differences in Part III.

How does a GM find out what camps players are in? Just ask them:

- "Would you prefer playing a rebel or a soldier?"
- "Would you prefer acting out scenes or scenes filled with action and fighting?"
- "Would you prefer a strict rule system or one that's more flexible to the story?"

Ultimately, how many camps there are, or even the idea that players should be categorized into camps doesn't matter. What's important is to be *aware* of the need to have players who are willing to work together. As the GM, you need to create a game where working together is actually possible, and that starts with the people playing.

Time Commitment

Unless a GM is going to run one-off adventures, he needs players to commit to a regular series of games.

The group doesn't have to play every night, every week or even every month. But they do need to play on a regular basis. The more time that elapses between game sessions, the weaker the story becomes. I've found that a four-hour game session every week or two is an effective schedule.

Getting people to commit to a long term RPG is difficult, and it only gets harder as people get older. As a teenager it is relatively easy to block out one night a week or do 48-hour fests. As colleges, careers, pets, mates, and

children appear, it becomes more and more difficult to find committable time for a long term RPG.

A regular time commitment is a deal-killer for a lot of people. Outline your time expectations to the players early on and let them honestly evaluate whether or not they can commit. Don't pressure them to join, because if they say they can make it but they actually can't, the game is in serious jeopardy. If a player commits to the game and then starts missing game sessions this is going to wreak havoc on your ability to create a compelling experience.

What's the Ideal Number of Players?

New Gamemasters should consider limiting the player group to two or three. The rule is: the more players the less fun for the players. Everyone wants to be the hero, or at least do interesting stuff. Each additional player decreases the amount of playing time everyone gets. More than four players means a lot of downtime for every player. This can get boring for players unless the GM is evocative, high-energy, organized, and experienced.

Furthermore, each additional player increases the chances that the GM will have to split the group. When the party is split, things get boring really fast for the ones left out, especially when they have to be moved to another room away from the action.

I've successfully gamemastered with one to six players and participated in games having as many as twelve people. I prefer a total of four people: three players and the Gamemaster. This mix allows for tight action, lots of participation, enough people to keep it interesting, and a good spectrum of talents.

Novice or Old Hand?

Mixing novices with crusty old players sets the stage for the best games. Often the best roleplaying comes from the novices! There is a tendency for some players (myself included) to adopt a "been there, done that" attitude that can be hard to overcome.

Going with only novices can be really fun because none of the players have any expectations. It requires more effort to explain game flow, get the players into character and the like – but it can be rewarding. Bringing in at least one newbie adds to everyone's enjoyment. Try to arrange for some "fresh blood" whenever you organize a new game.

I recommend that newbie Gamemasters should only consider running a game with newbie players – or with experienced players known to be forgiving.

Finding Players

If you're having trouble finding likely players, increase your circle of friends. You might have some luck hanging out at your local hobby shop, finding a local chapter of the SCA (Society for Creative Anachronism), or looking on the Internet.

I believe the best place to find new players (and great friends) is to volunteer with a group that appeals to you. People who volunteer are generally social, fun and interesting.

The Pitch

First and foremost, the players have to *want* to play. Part of the GM's job is to get them excited about playing.

Pitch is a useful Hollywood term. It refers to the short speech creative types develop to sell their concepts to studios, directors, and actors. The best creatives spend time polishing their pitch. Do the same with your early game concepts.

The pitch gets players excited about participating in the game. The quality of the pitch is going to reflect on the quality of the game. Never start a pitch during a commercial break or in between video game rounds. Set the stage. Sit down someplace where you can talk with the player alone, face-to-face.

If you are serious about having a good game spend a lot of time polishing the pitch. Write it out, revising it to eliminate unnecessary words. Read it aloud, then revise until you're happy with it. Only when you can get the core of the game across in less than a minute are you ready to pitch to a prospective player.

Ultimately GMs have to decide when a pitch feels ready, but at the very least they should have a clear idea of what they are going to say before they say it. The prospective player, consciously or unconsciously, will react far more favorably when the GM articulates a fun, interesting game concept clearly and quickly.

Pitching the Novice

If the prospective player is a novice, recruiting him will take some work. At some point as the GM discusses what roleplaying is, the novice is likely to ask, "Oh, you mean like *Dungeons and Dragons*?"

Never just say, "Yes" – even if you're going to use the *D&D* system. Here's why: you have no idea what that person's idea of *D&D* is. Their only exposure to it may have been the appalling movie *Dungeons and Dragons*. Perhaps they had a bad game experience long ago. Or maybe they are

thinking of computer RPGs, which have only the loosest possible relation to pen and paper RPGs.

Ask them to explain their experiences with or knowledge about roleplaying. Be prepared to explain or correct any misconceptions. You might say something like:

“Roleplaying is a unique kind of game. It takes a bit to explain but I think it’s better than any kind of game I’ve ever played. Roleplaying is like acting in a movie and writing it at the same time. Only different. It’s improvisational theater with rules. Only different.

The universe of the game you play in can be based on a book or a movie or totally made up. You would be like the hero in a movie, except movies are pre-written. Roleplaying isn’t. You decide what you want your hero to do. And your hero could be whoever you wanted him to be.

You would join forces with two other people, maybe Xander and Rachel, and the three of you would run around in this imaginary universe and have all sorts of adventures. I would act out the roles of everyone you meet, describe the universe, and handle the bookkeeping and administration of the game.

Sound fun?”

Of course you wouldn’t just rattle that entire block of text off, it would be a discussion between you and the prospective player. The most important idea to convey is that the goal is *having fun*.

Setting Up

Once you have scouted out some potential players, start thinking about the *game setting* - what kind of universe you would like to bring to life. Long before you begin sketching out adventures or working on the universe, even before you buy a game system, talk over the general concept of the game with the players. Do they *want* to play in that game universe? No matter how fun a futuristic fuzzy animal game might sound to a gamemaster, if the players aren’t interested the game will go nowhere.

Now put the second pitch together and give it to the players – “Hey, I have an idea for that roleplaying game we were talking about. How does this sound – sort of like the old *Farscape* TV series only with no humans, just weird aliens. You guys would have a living starship like *Moya*, and you’d go planet-hopping having adventures like they did on the show. What do you think?”

As you are working on the second pitch keep everything general and state the adventure from the player’s point of view, not from yours. So rather than say, “I want to Gamemaster a time-traveling game and I’ll be cooking up a lot of strange adventures to put you through,” reframe it

from the player's point of view like this: "How would you like to play a time-traveler, moving from one historical period to the next?"

Try to add some elements of choice to the pitch. "We could do more of a Dr. Who-type adventure, or an H.G. Wells-type game." This gives the players ownership in the game and sets the precedent that they're co-creators, not just along for the ride.

This is important. A lot of players worry that they will be subjected to some awful experience out of their control, like having to sit through some terrible author reading page after page of mind-numbing poetry. The players need to understand they'll be dictating their actions, not the Gamemaster. That they'll be the *heroes*, not the flunkies.

It might take a few rounds of listening to the players' desires and adjusting the game concept until everyone is happy. The first idea might have been a "fuzzy alien" type game based on *Farscape*, but after talking with the players it might end up being based on the *Firefly* TV show.

Once you are confident the players are excited about the game setting, it's time to settle on a rules system.

An Example Second Pitch

"Imagine a game like the science fiction show *Firefly*. You'd be hopping from planet to planet in a beat-up old starship, outwitting pirates, doing business with outlaws, evading Alliance forces, and just trying to stay alive on the frontier. Sound fun?"

Choosing a Game System

It is important that the game system reflect the entire group's Rule Camp. There are many, many game systems to choose from. Some are booklet sized and quite usable, and others require a dozen or more thick volumes and work better the more volumes that are used, almost as if they were designed to get people to spend a lot of money. That may be a smart business move for the publisher, but it might not lead to a better game.

Over the past thirty years I've gamemastered and played with quite a few systems. I own many more systems than I ever got around to using. However, for many years now I have preferred to take source material from established game systems and use my own rules.

With new players and Gamemasters, it might make more sense to use an established system and stick more or less to its rules. Do whatever works for the group. It's a good idea to get the buy-in of your players on the game system if they're experienced roleplayers, but the GM should make the final decision on the game system. After all, the GM is going to be doing most of the work and the judging.

Things to consider in a rules system:

- Is it well indexed so you can quickly find what you need? Think of some common actions; climbing a wall, or swinging across a chasm on a rope. Can you quickly find the right section in the rules?
- Are the combat rules clear? Is it easy to administer combat?
- Is there sufficient source material to draw upon as the campaign unfolds?
- Are there lots of choices for PC types? Enough variety of skills, powers and items?
- Think about your players; will they enjoy digging into lots of rules or will they prefer a cleaner system?

Most importantly, gameplay has to be smooth. The game system will dictate how smooth play will be. The rules should be nearly transparent. That is, the GM and eventually the players should know them so well that they aren't an impediment to having fun.

Test and get comfortable with the rules before the first session. Create some throwaway characters and put them through combat. Experiment with different actions. Get solid on the rules. The last thing a GM wants is to be scratching his head, flipping pages, and winging it in front of the players. This is the surest way for players to lose faith in the GM and lose interest in the game.

Once you're solid on the rules throw away the throwaway characters. There is no place for them in a good game.

Change the Rules

As you read over a rules system you might find things you disagree with. Rules that just don't make sense. When you find these deal breakers just axe or modify them.

For example, classic *Traveller* character generation allows a substantial possibility that one or more characters will die before they even begin adventuring! So I axed that rule.

In another well-known system combat rounds lasted a full minute with only one combat action allowed in each round. That made no sense to me, so I modified a combat round to three seconds, which is already a lot of time in a brawl or swordfight.

Some rules feel like they are there because the game designer believes Gamemasters can't be trusted. Trying to tie up a GM in rules is a fool's errand. Either the players trust the GM to give them a satisfying experience or they don't. No amount of rules will make a GM more trustworthy.

Make a note of any changes and decide if the change is important enough to communicate to the players. Some Gamemasters have quite a lot of these *house rules*, and most should be shared with the players.

Chapter 3

Creating the Universe

Now that a game system has been selected it is time to create the universe the heroes will be adventuring in. Many Gamemasters may feel overwhelmed at this point. “Create the universe?” some GMs think, “Isn’t that a rather large task?”

Well, yes and no. If a GM follows the traditional RPG method, *yes*. If the GM follows this book, *no*.

The traditional method of universe building requires that the Gamemaster lock himself away in a shack somewhere for weeks, months, or years, drawing up elaborate maps, developing extensive histories and backgrounds for peoples and cities, and emerging with no less than 600 pages of ten point, single-spaced detail. The alternative is buying source material and spending a lot of time reading and digesting it.

Okay, I’m exaggerating a bit, but most Gamemasters spend way too much time creating their universe. And only a fraction of the material typically created will ever be used. This leads to Gamemaster frustration and burnout.

This is a shame because all we need for a vibrant, rich game are a handful of details about each society and a bit of geography. It might take a couple of hours to put together the information we need at the start of a game. I’m convinced this can be done in less time than it takes to *read* a published roleplaying universe.

We’ll begin with building a society.

Society

A society is simply a collection of unique behaviors that define a group of people. These details dictate what is and is not possible for its people.

In the beginning, I recommend creating only one or two societies – the society the characters are from, and an optional antagonist society. Start with something like “*Elves and Orcs*,” or “*the Allies and the Axis*.”

It can be tempting to create a bunch of societies at first. However, the more the GM creates, the harder it will be for the players to remember one from the other. Start small and roll out more societies as the adventure unfolds. Start the game with the characters in their home society. Playing

the good guy from an antagonist society is a great, but advanced, premise. Novices should keep it simple.

Step One: Social Class

The *Social Class Table* suggests a number of possibilities for how a society is organized at a fundamental level. Once you decide on the number of classes, rank the classes from least powerful to most powerful.

Social Class Table	
1	No classes
2	Woman, Man
3	Tribesman, Elder
4	Worker, Elite
5	Follower, Organizer, Charismatic Leader
6	Merchant, Peasant, Warrior, Nobility
7	Slave, Serf, Warrior, Merchant, Noble, Priest
8	Serf, Merchant, Mercenary, Priest, Soldier, Noble
9	Slave, Peasant, Merchant, Priest, Nobility
10	Slave, Freeman, Landowner
11	Beggar, Worker, Manager, Elite
12	Combination of any of the above

Step Two: Class Assignment

Next determine how an individual comes to be associated with the different classes in a society. Several ways to do this are listed in the *Social Class Assignment Table*. Make note of how rigid the boundaries are between classes.

Social Class Assignment Table		
	Class	Explanation
1	Birthright	By heredity
2	Gender	By sex
3	Merit	By honorable deeds, business acumen, etc.
4	Martial	Through success in battle
5	Priesthood	By service to religion
6	Seniority	By length of time in active practice
7	Lottery	Randomly (for example, jury duty)
8	Combination of any of the above	

Step Three: Political System

At this point consider how the classes work together. How are major decisions made, and how is power distributed? The *Political Rule Table* lists a few types of government.

Political Rule Table	
Method	Brief Explanation
1 Anarchy	The strongest rule
2 Collective	Small scale, highly involved democracy
3 Elder(s)	One or several of the oldest, wisest
4 Patriarchal/matriarchal	Rule exclusively by either men or women
5 Chief/boss	An elected or natural leader
6 Landowner	Only those owning property
7 Religious	Rule by the priesthood
8 Monarchy	Sole power vested in an individual by divine right
9 Parliamentary	Elected officials represent citizens, multiple parties
10 Representative	Elected officials represent citizens, two parties
11 Mercantilist	A wealthy merchant class rules
12 Fascism	Rule by (generally military) corporations
13 Sole Party	Rule by a single all-powerful government organization
14 Dictatorship	Sole power vested in an individual by seizure of power
15 Military rule	Rule by the military
16 Service democracy	Voting rights are earned only after military or government service
17 True democracy	One citizen, one vote
18 Artificial intelligence	Rule by computer

Class Culture

Each class in a society needs its own culture with just five details: conflicts, taboos, visuals, verbals, and complexities. Obviously cultures are far more complex than this, but for roleplaying purposes this is enough. This framework helps create satisfying adventures and makes each class feel distinct.

Step One: Conflicts

Each class should be in conflict or in a negative/exploitative relationship with one or at most two other classes. You'll use these points of conflict

when creating adventures and the key GCs that revolve around them. The *Class Conflict Table* gives some examples.

Class Conflict Table		
1	Masters	Slaves
2	Management	Labor
3	Landowners	Landless
4	Organization A	Organization B
5	Rich	Poor
6	Religion X	Religion Y
7	Religious	Non-religious
8	Old	Young
9	Voting	Non-voting
10	Workers	Unemployed
11	Pushers	Addicts
12	Political party members	Non-party members

Step Two: Taboos

Every class has taboos – those things that *just aren't done*. Some have serious consequences such as ostracism or even death, others will bring shame upon the individual. A number of potentially forbidden or embarrassing acts are listed on the *Table of Social Taboos*. Choose one or at most two taboos for each class so they're easily remembered as the adventure unfolds.

Table of Social Taboos		
Type	Examples	
1	No taboos	
2	Class interaction	Looking, interacting, intermarrying
3	Outsider interaction	Same as class interaction but with foreigners
4	Asking questions	Questioning the established way of things
5	Daily habits	Eating, worship, work, sleep
6	Physical	Clothes, hair, adornments, makeup
7	Travel	Walkabouts, wanderlust, exploration
8	Slacking	Failing to contribute to society

Step Three: Visuals

Visuals are details that are used to identify an individual's membership in a given class to others on sight. Here are a few:

- Styles of clothing
- Body modifications (nose rings, tattoos, stretched earlobes, etc.)

- Charms
- Weapons
- Haircuts
- Handshakes, salutes, hand signs or gestures

Step Four: Verbals

Verbals are details one picks up only when hearing an individual in a particular class speak. Verbals include:

- Accents - a particular way of pronouncing words. How does a New Yorker say "hot dog?" compared to a Texan?
- Lingo - unique words used only by a certain cultural group. The words "bad" and "sick" mean different things to different age groups in North America. "Pissed" has a *completely* different meaning in the UK than in the United States.
- Salutations - special ways of saying hello or goodbye. Some hellos and goodbyes are long and involve praise and lots of flowery language. Others use complex hand signals. Salutations can be mean-spirited or meek, and often convey respect or acknowledgement of social status as when one social class gives salutation to another.
- Prayers - short phrases or references to deity used in common speech. Some cultural groups often end sentences with "Thanks be to (deity)," or "(name) be praised." Other groups quote holy scripture often as a way to reinforce unity and behavior.

Step Five: Complexities

Complexities are general tendencies only understood after longer interaction with a class. Some complexities:

- Xenophobic level – general friendliness to strangers, tolerance of outsiders and outside behavior
- Outlook on life – fatalistic, conquering, relaxed, optimistic, realistic, ruthless, and other traits
- Talkativeness – are they chatty and engaging or reserved and quiet?
- Superstitions – unprovable beliefs that govern behavior
- Cooperativeness – is the culture fundamentally based on cooperation (say, farming) or competition (for example, herding)¹

Are they outwardly friendly even if they don't consider one a friend, or do they have a cool or distant disposition to strangers but a fierce loyalty to friends? All cultures have superstitions or unprovable beliefs – how do these beliefs encourage certain acts or limit others? Do they often fight or even kill to demonstrate social skill or defend their honor?

¹ For a fascinating discussion on herder and other honor cultures read *Outliers: The Story of Success* by Malcom Gladwell.

Law

Now consider how law is administered. The heroes are either going to frequently run afoul of the law, or they're going to be agents of it. Either way you have to know how the system works.

In many actual human societies the law is applied differently for each class. This creates more work for the GM but more points of conflict in the game.

There are four steps for this stage.

Step One: Judgment

Is guilt determined case-by-case according to an unwritten, social tradition or is there a written system of laws or other method? And who decides? The *Judge Table* has a list of possibilities.

Judge Table	
1	Group consensus
2	"Judge, jury and executioner"
3	Elder/king
4	Delegate
5	Nobility
6	Appointed judge
7	Randomly selected citizens
8	Wizards/other magical means
9	Psychics/mindreaders/other psionic methods
10	Truth serums/lie detectors/other technical methods

Step Two: Justice

Once guilt is established, what is considered justice? Check the *Justice Table* for a list of some approaches to justice.

Justice Table	
1	An eye for an eye
2	Monetary compensation
3	Hard labor or community service
4	Incarceration
5	Public humiliation
6	Correctional action (education, magical or technological)
7	Slavery
8	Gladiatorial

Step Three: Corruption

At this point consider how susceptible the law is to corruption. Fighting one form of corruption or another is the basis for many adventures. Also, this question may arise if player characters fall afoul of the law.

Step Four: Weapons

Lastly, and a key question for most roleplaying games – what kinds of weapons are permitted, by whom, and under what circumstances? For example, can you carry a handgun in public if you have a permit issued by the government? Can you wear a sword only if you are part of a certain class?

The *Traveller* game system has a simple and useful table for determining permissible weapons that is worth a look if your game system doesn't.

Resources/Relations

Now that you have the classes down, define the key goods, services and resources the society needs, what it trades, and how it relates to other neighboring societies. Knowing this information helps you develop adventures as well as describe the broad details of a society during the game.

Each resource must meet two criteria: it must be scarce and other societies must strongly desire the same resource. Nothing else matters for game purposes. Resources range from food and water to raw minerals, energy sources, cheap labor, sunlight, even oxygen. The resource might be processed food or spices, knowledge, technology, or entertainment. The resource may be made artificially scarce by a controlling entity. One or two resources are enough to create necessary game dynamics.

Now decide among three possibilities for the society for each resource:

- They possess a resource, good or service that can be traded favorably, or;
- They must trade at a disadvantage, or;
- The society can trade at parity with other cultures, neither gaining nor losing

In the first case, the society is wealthy in comparison to others. In the second it is poorer and in the third it is on equal footing.

Some other details you might add include: How does that society deal with its wealth or lack of it? Whom do they trade with? Are there any materials this culture is dependent on? Does this society produce items that other societies rely on? Are any other societies competing for the same resources? How does the society view their competition?

Architecture

Societies need an architectural visual, too. As with cultures, choose a single detail to focus on. Easy things to focus on are the colors, materials,

or size of buildings. Choose something dramatic and visible from a distance. Glass towers or earthen walls, purple rooftops or black solar panels, towering skyscrapers or suburban sprawl.

Summary: How to Create a Society

1. Choose and rank social classes
2. Determine how individuals attain membership in each class
3. Select a system of political rule
4. Decide on conflicts, taboos, visuals, verbals, and complexities for each class
5. Define the structure of law, and whether it applies equally to all classes
6. Create at least one resource
7. Make up an architectural style

Geography

Just one more detail is necessary to complete the pre-game creation of a universe – a rough map of the area being played in. My preference is to create the society first and fit the geography to the society. Others like to lay down the geography and generate ideas for the society afterwards. Do what works for you.

I'm not a cartographer. In fact, my drawing skill is somewhere around the second grade level, so I draw the least amount of geography that is necessary. At a minimum, the starting game map needs:

- An outline of the area the society lives in
- Key resources and major production sites
- Major population centers
- Major geographical features such as seas, forests, rivers, deserts, and mountain ranges
- Borders with other societies
- Major roads

Since I'm not good at making maps, I often buy them from a professional game publisher. If I'm lucky, enough material is given in the game system core rulebooks to define all of the elements needed. Usually buying a supplement or adventure is required. I almost always modify the material, but it saves a huge amount of time to use existing material and it looks a heck of a lot better than anything I can produce.

Now take a look at two universe skeletons; *Anneborn* and *Frontiers*. I'll be using these example campaigns throughout the book. Here's how little we need to create a vibrant, believable universe:

Anneborn Universe Skeleton

The game begins on the island kingdom of Anneborn, largest of the Celephan Islands, well known for their purple rooftops and spices. The island is approximately ten days ride across the longest part. A mountain range cuts across the island, dividing the kingdom.

Anneborn is a feudal monarchy technically under the rule of Queen Aribeth. The Queen is elderly and there is no heir apparent. Six feudal nobles are scheming and occasionally fighting openly in an attempt to solidify power across the kingdom. Of these, the Marquis of Yarlén and the Duke of Swall currently hold the most power. The Marquis controls the western port of Yarlén and the Duke controls the northern port of Swall.

Anneborn holds to the strict class-based, birthright system used across most of the Celephan Islands, from lowest to highest Serfs/Soldiers, Adjudicators, Nobles and above all the Queen. Interaction between classes is severely limited with no chance for advancement out of a particular class.

Anneborians favor brightly colored clothing, and its Adjudicators are noted for the magnificent plumage of their helms, feathers obtained at great personal risk from the multicolored wings of the Manticore that inhabit the southern wastes and prey on unwary sailors. Serfs and soldiers tend to speak in a heavy, drawling Scottish accent and wear loose-fitting tunics and trousers. Most soldiers are equipped with a longsword and a chainmail coat. The lower class are forbidden to address a noble unless first spoken to, and many resent the luxurious lifestyle of the nobles. Nobles wear ornate great cloaks and heavy jewelry and speak in a clipped, precise manner. The noble class has strict rules for engaging with others of their class to limit open warfare - in practice this leads to isolation. Most Anneborian nobles are outwardly charming but ruthless.

They are a generally tolerant people, being exposed to all manner of culture by virtue of their two great ports, and insulated from serious invasion by their location.

Western Anneborians are generally regarded as the more hardworking stoic type, where the Northern Anneborians tend towards the more relaxed and lively side. There is little love lost between those of the North and those of the West. Locals recognize only a north or west because of the boomerang shape of the island.

Anneborian spice is a highly desired product and the kingdom trades far and wide to great profit with it. This enables the kingdom to import luxuries from the world over and live a bountiful lifestyle.

The Anneborian nobles employ wandering Adjudicators to administer a type of justice to the lower classes and non-noble foreigners that is swift and fair although often brutal. The Adjudicators enjoy a lifestyle close to that of a noble, ensuring justice is done with little chance of bribe or influence. The nobles resolve their quarrels largely through convoluted written or verbal arguments and occasionally by duels.

Weapons are worn by soldiers, adjudicators, and nobles only.

Frontiers Universe Skeleton

The game takes place on the frontier worlds of the human race in the year 2500. Revered by some, feared by others, five years ago the Alliance ended a dozen years of bloody war and unified all human worlds under one body. The Alliance is the governing body that has supreme authority on land and in space – although in practice actual planetbound governance is left to system and planetary governments. There are over 150 Alliance worlds, though the vast majority are newly terraformed worlds with extremely primitive technology.

The Alliance

Alliance culture is a military hierarchy. Advancement is by merit and seniority. The Alliance demands rigid adherence to orders, the Alliance Code, and the Alliance itself.

Visual/Verbal: Alliance soldiers wear sparse, pristine black and grey uniforms with chromed insignia. They prefer to speak in short, sharp, often coded language.

Complexities: Alliance officers are stiff, formal, generally hostile to suggestions, and fear things that they don't understand. They are accustomed to and demand to be treated with great respect. Alliance soldiers are similarly xenophobic and are confident they have the greatest jobs in the universe. All Alliance personnel regard interactions with non-Alliance people to be distasteful at best, and generally perceive such people to be criminals or second-class citizens.

Resources: The core worlds funded and backed the Alliance during the war, but have since insisted that the Alliance pay its own way through taxes. Thus, the Alliance sets and collects a tax on all interstellar shipping, all starport services, and for the use of navigational services. This has led to a growing underground movement in light freighters who bypass these taxes by flying circuitous routes, and a small but persistent class of pirates who prey on those that ship outside the legally-patrolled spacelanes. The Alliance maintains a number of dual-duty destroyer-class vessels to fill the role of piracy suppression and tax enforcement.

Law enforcement: Alliance captains on the frontier are given great leeway to interpret Alliance law and local law as they see fit. When they are on patrol, they are truly judge, jury and executioner. They have the power to commandeer vessels and have been known to seize vessels on relatively minor offenses. As in all military cultures, disobeying orders, showing disrespect for authority, and so on is unacceptable. Officers administer the Code and are given life and death authority in the field over noncoms and citizens, a duty they perform with relish and cruelty. Weapons are carried by all Alliance personnel.

Frontier Worlds

Each frontier world generally adopts the ancient culture of its settlers. Typically settlers follow their ancient Earth cultures to a far greater degree than their 21st Century ancestors. They dress according to the ancient ways, use ancient languages and rituals, and are fiercely protective of their ancient cultures. Life on the frontier is hard, and this identity is often all they have. Only one or two cultures typically inhabit each frontier world, although there are some notable melting pot exceptions. Social dynamics are complex and varied.

Cradlers

Inhabitants of the outlying frontier world Cradle Down are descended from Scottish Highlanders, and have adopted a slightly modernized culture that mostly emulates that of the ancient Scot. Many Cradlers fought against the Alliance and since defeat have returned to their merchant clans.

Visual/Verbal: Male Cradlers prefer kilts or great kilts with details carved from stone, bone, and wood. They speak in thick Scottish accents that can easily be made incomprehensible to outsiders.

Complexities: Cradlers have a strong sense of clan and an even stronger dislike of outsiders. Most of their best and brightest trade with local systems and barely eke out a living.

Law: Local chiefs rule over villages and towns and administer eye-for-an-eye style justice. Primitive weapons are permitted, but gunpowder or energy-based weapons are strictly prohibited.

Resources: Cradle Down produces a variety of agricultural exports, most notably a strong honey-based liquor called *Mek*. Cradle Down is a poor world and trades at a massive disadvantage with others. Cradlers are constantly short of technology but take great pride in maintaining a fleet of aging merchant starships.

These broadly stroked details are enough to have in place before characters are created. Don't define too much in advance for three reasons: the players are likely to come up with good ideas to incorporate into the universe as they create their characters, you want maximum freedom to add

cultural details to fit the story once the game begins, and most importantly, you won't have any idea what kind of details to fill in and focus on until the characters are created.

Now that you have *just enough* of a universe together, it is time to work on characters.

Chapter 4

Character Creation

Once you choose a game system, are comfortable with its rules, and have a skeleton universe, it is time to create characters.

Character Creation Before Adventure Creation

At this point the traditional next action would be to write an adventure.

As I noted earlier in the book and vigorously emphasize again, this is a mistake! I'm convinced this is a major reason why so many roleplaying games fail. This is most certainly *not* the time to start adventure building.

As any experienced Gamemaster will say, players rarely—if ever—do what the GM expects. Many Gamemasters have been frustrated or disappointed when their players take off in an entirely unexpected direction, wasting hours of Gamemaster prep.

This “hope for the best” model for creating an adventure is dangerous. It takes many sessions to get a sense for what players want. Most players aren't that patient. If the GM doesn't luck out within the first session or two, the players check out.

There is a better way. Don't make guesses about what the players want. Ask them what they want – frequently.

Begin with the central element in any roleplaying game: the player character. (Some would say pizza, but I disagree.)

The player character is far more important than source material. If the players have one-dimensional characters, they aren't going to care about anything in the game world because their characters don't mean anything to them. The game is going to fall flat.

GMs who want to stage great games have to invest substantial time with each player before the game starts to create a character. It might sound like a lot of work, and compared to the random, pointless way most characters are generated, it is. But the results are worth it. With strong player characters you'll have a better game that takes a fraction of the time to plan for.

Interestingly, quite a few movies are written specifically for certain actors. In other words, the scriptwriter already has particular actors in mind *before* the story is written. Similarly, knowing your players and their characters before the adventure is written is essential.

Insist on Likable Characters

There is only one thing you must insist on in every character—they have to be likable. Often players will envision a dark, gruff loner as their character, some psychotic wacko or sociopathic thief. Don't let it happen.

There's nothing wrong with characters having rough edges or prickly elements in their natures. But roleplaying is a shared experience; the other players have to *like* all the characters.

This usually means that each character *cares* about other people, in other words they are "good at heart." They don't have to care about everyone, but they at least need to be trusted by others on the team.

'Role Up' a Character

Characters in most roleplaying games are created by rolling the dice to randomly determine key attributes. Some games allow players to assign attributes based on certain formulas, or use templates instead. Then one chooses from a variety of generic adventuring job classes, chooses some talents, possibly bolts on some basic character history, gets some gear, and then pronounces the character done. The words used to describe a character will vary – for example, there are almost as many synonyms for *class* as there are game systems – profession, type, job, role, they're all basically the same thing.

Unfortunately, this simplistic process leads to shallow games where players don't so much roleplay as act in whatever way they happen to feel at that moment. People often call this "rolling up a character" which makes me cringe. The players can't be blamed, though. They have nothing to work from. Nor should the GM be blamed – they're all just following the rules.

Why Generating Random Characters is a Bad Idea

Roleplaying is about heroics, about being something one could never be in real life. A character in a roleplaying game should never be random. We've already been dealt a random hand in the game of life. Roleplaying is a chance to determine our hand in advance and play it out.

The idea of randomness at this stage is deep-rooted in the roleplaying scene. As of this writing, only the indie RPGs trend towards character creation. I even fell victim to this inertia as I wrote this book – I originally called this section "Character Generation." It took a year of writing to realize that the phrase was totally inappropriate – players should *never* generate a character. Generation implies a strong element of randomness. Characters are *created*.

What is being created here is an expression of desire, a role, an object of fun that a person can explore, adventure through, and become invested in.

The player should be given the choice of any attributes or skills the game system offers.

Some GMs might be worried that given total freedom to choose, players may be tempted to play a near-superhuman with maxed-out stats. And given a choice, most novice players *will* choose the most powerful stats. Before we label these players as shallow, why is it so wrong to want to play a powerful character? Isn't that the definition of a hero?

Many GMs worry that a superhuman character is going to be impossible to keep entertained and properly challenged. As long as the GM keeps the challenges balanced and follows the guidelines laid out in this book this isn't an issue.

It takes a lot of experience and trust for a player to act out weak, underpowered characters. I believe this decision should be solely up to the player.

However, you do need to insist on starting characters with little or no experience and virtually no cash or items. They might have powerful physical and mental characteristics, and they might have a lot of basic skills, but only in the rarest situations (and only with expert players) should you allow highly skilled and equipped characters at the beginning of a game. Starting characters with a powerful foundation of brains, brawn, speed, and other strong traits but keeping them inexperienced and ill-equipped makes the game much more fun for everyone.

"Why is that more fun for everyone?" you might ask. The reason is simple – nearly all game systems are designed to start with novice characters, so-called *zero level* characters. A GM who allows players to start with highly experienced characters will lose most of the built-in fun of discovering new powers.

There are other reasons. When a character starts with no weapons and no experience even a rabid rat can be made scary. A single piece of silver is a treasure. Just getting a decent weapon is something valued. And then imagine how fantastic it will be when the team gets a high quality item! Only then will players truly appreciate their characters' gear.

So instead of rolling up a character, "role" one up. The process starts with a character interview.

The Character Interview

Treat the interview as a really fun brainstorming session. It's more than asking questions. It is a fun exchange where the player and GM play ideas off one another and stimulate each other's creativity.

As the interview proceeds always keep suggestions to the player general and open-ended. The player has to take ownership of their character in order to play with enough conviction to keep the game in high gear. It's the player's responsibility to decide on their character, not that of the GM.

A GM may have to tone down or adjust the player's ideas to fit the game world but overall the decisions rest with the player.

Difficult to Impossible Roles

Some players will want to try playing extreme roles. Playing a different gender is a common request. Playing an insane person is another.

This is a lot harder than it seems. Only the best actors can pull this off in the movies. It's extremely difficult for a man to convincingly play a woman (or vice versa). Even harder is to consistently roleplay insanity. It is hard enough to pretend to be an adventurer. Do we need to add to the challenge?

As long as the player and GM are experienced roleplayers, and committed to the bad as well as the good that comes along with these choices, it can be fun. Sometimes these choices can indicate that a player might not be into the game, or worried that they might not be entertained. Possibly they haven't even thought through the potential consequences.

The primary difficulty with insanity is determining when and how a character is sane. Should it be outside of the player's control? What is a reasonable balance? With gender switching, men really are from Mars and women really are from Venus. The differences are legion, and I haven't come across a rule system that will help a GM or player grapple with those differences in a game. As well, discomfort can arise in player-player and player-GM interactions. Some lines may be better left uncrossed.

If the GM and player both agree on pursuing this extremely challenging task, great. A GM that does this should be prepared for a lot of work.

If you don't feel the player is up to the task or you aren't interested in the additional overhead, it is okay to tell the player "no." Point out the difficulties involved and how cumbersome it will get after a short time.

Intro to the Universe

An important part of the interview's purpose is to give the player an introduction to the game universe. During the interview you might pass on special information that only that one character knows about the world. If the information is important, see to it the player writes it down or it will be forgotten.

Likewise, as you walk through the stages of the interview, you might get a sudden inspiration about what the universe should be like. Write it down then and there. I've lost too many good ideas because I didn't make a note of them.

The Result

The primary reason for the interview is the creation of four lists by the player. These lists will add flesh, bones and spirit to the character. First we have the Rights and Wrongs Sheet, then the Friends and Foes Sheet, next a Goal Sheet, and finally a Quirks and Traits Sheet. The lists build upon each other until at the end of the interview the player has a solid, three-dimensional character with plenty of room to grow.

Armed with this knowledge players will be motivated to play. They will be clear on what their character wants and have a better idea of where they fit in the world. And the GM will have a rich source of material to base adventures on that will be immediately relevant to the players.

Getting Players to Open Up

Leading questions are questions that don't give the player freedom in his answers. Open-ended questions give the player the chance to answer for himself. It's important to be aware of the difference and to use open-ended questions during the interview.

During the process avoid asking leading questions like:

"Do you hate the King?"

"Do you want to fight for the city?"

Instead, use open-ended questions such as:

"What do you hate most in the world?"

"What would you like to change in the world?"

"What do you love the most?"

"What kind of friends do you have?"

"How do you feel about authority/military/police/government?"

Do not settle for non-committal answers. "I don't know" is not acceptable. If you're at an impasse, discuss the block with the player and offer some possibilities. First you might talk about the world you're creating. Use movies, books, plays, TV shows, cartoons, comics, and real-life experiences as examples of characters. You might say something like, "It sounds like this player is going to have a darker and more complex side to him. Do you see this player as being more melancholy, often grappling with their dark side as Elric of Melnibone or someone more actively dark but capable of good with multiple hidden agendas like Scorpius from *Farscape*?"

Action Camp Character Creation

Players in the Action camp will push hard for quick character creation - even some in the Acting camp may prefer to create a skeleton character that they fill out over many sessions. In either case the Action Framework on page 64 lists the minimum necessary character details.

Step 1: Define the Character Class/Profession

Start off the interview by going over the job of each different player character type in the chosen system – and their primary role in the game. Spend time explaining what each type can and cannot do, what their general strengths and weaknesses are, and the kinds of powers or skills they're likely to get as the game progresses.

Who Do You Want to Be?

Spend as much time pointing out all the cool things a character will be able to do as they gain experience as you do talking about what they will find it hard to do or won't be able to do in the beginning. Novice players often have no idea what the weaknesses or limitations of a particular character type is – that rogues/thieves aren't as good in a battle as fighters, and won't be able to cast magic spells, for example. It may sound obvious to an experienced roleplayer, but a person coming to a new game system won't have that knowledge.

When my wife first started roleplaying she chose a rogue but didn't really understand a rogue's drawbacks. When she saw the other players with magic spells and engaging in heavy combat she felt like she was missing out on fun things other players were getting to do.

In my wife's case this didn't come up until two sessions had been played. I sat down with her and listened to what she wanted. We adjusted her character's skills so that she was stronger in combat. We even worked in a magic spell that she could use. And lest you think that I did that just because we're married, I often do the same with other new players.

After you have given a brief overview of each PC type, ask each player what kind of character he or she wants to be. It's good to do this as a group. It allows the GM to balance the team so you don't end up with, say, three fighters in a game system and setting that really wants a fighter, thief and wizard. Again, this assumes that the group wants a balanced team – we all know how much fun the Three Musketeers had.

Once each player has made a decision on type, most Gamemasters follow the rules and have the players randomly generate characters. They basically kill any chance of real character development and player attachment right there. This method sets everyone up for a lackluster game. The GM should spend much more time on the interviews than crafting the

first couple of adventures. If he doesn't, the players will be totally lost in the game world. They won't know what they believe in or what they are supposed to do. The game will drift aimlessly, and generally that will lead to random disrespectful actions. That's why you should take character creation into your own hands.

Once you have the class for each player character, separate the players and do the remaining stages of the character interview privately. Most players feel more comfortable with the interview when it is one-on-one. You can devote your full attention to the player, and part of the fun for a player is revealing character secrets to the other players as the game progresses.

The more time a GM takes with the following steps, the better the game is going to be. It can seem a bit like squeezing blood from a stone at times, especially if the player is new to roleplaying, but the work done now eliminates hours and hours of frustration later.

D&D Alignment

The *Dungeons and Dragons* system has a concept of alignment ranging from Good to Evil with Chaotic, Neutral, and Lawful characteristics. Unfortunately the simplistic mechanic of choosing an alignment and being forced to stick with it (or be penalized by the game system for diverging) takes away from meaningful character development.

Think about it. Part of what makes a story compelling is how a character changes. We like to see (and play) characters that start in one place and end up in another.

Rigidly defined alignments such as Neutral Good are terrible concepts in a game. They act as a powerful force against a character's ability for self-discovery and development. What I'm saying here goes against the *D&D* gospel, but in my opinion, based on many years of roleplaying with a large number of different game systems, the concept of alignment may be the biggest obstacle to roleplaying ever introduced.

If you want character development in your game, abolish alignment.

Step 2: Create a Rough Outline

The next step is to get a rough outline of who this character is going to be. We're just shooting for one or two short paragraphs at this point.

Get the ball rolling by asking the player general questions about the character. You're aiming for generalities here that will be built on later. Here are some questions you might use:

"What do you look like?"

“How did you end up in your profession?”
 “Who are your (or your profession’s) enemies?”
 “What do you think is worth fighting for?”
 “Who are your friends?”
 “Where were you born? Which class do you belong to?”
 “What goals do people in this profession have?”

After getting some generalities sketched out, move to one or two class-specific questions. Say the character is a fighter:

“Does this fighter want to command a team or be the heroic rescuer?”
 “Do they simply lust for battle? Or is there a reason for their wrath?”

Again, do not accept “I don’t know” as an answer. As GM, you must find out what each player wants and let that shape the character they will play, and by extension the adventures the whole team will experience.

Shaping the rough outline should be a dialog. The GM feeds details to the player about what the game universe is going to be like for the character type they’ve chosen. The player in turn works with that information and adds details about their character – and maybe even about the game universe.

The goal of this step is to create a thumbnail of the character’s background – nothing too detailed, just a paragraph or two that might be greatly modified before the end of the interview.

Above all, a likable character must emerge from this step.

I’ll use an example character called Arlon throughout the book as we build a character and run into different situations.

Outline for Arlon

Arlon hails from a trader family. Dock fights are extremely common among competing families and things such as berth assignment and cargoes are often handled by ritualized boxing. Arlon sees fights as a natural and fair way to settle an argument, or release some pent up aggression. His primary targets would be peers from competing (feuding) merchant families. On rare occasions this might extend to interactions with non-merchant folk.

Being from a merchant trader family, he can count all of the hundreds in his clan as well as several allied clans as blood friends. He’s comfortable with and prefers taking orders rather than leading.

Arlon is young and has something to prove, but he hasn’t quite worked out what that is yet.

Step 3: Rights and Wrongs Sheet

Now that a basic thumbnail is in place, it's time to start filling in details. During this part of the interview ask the player to write down what their character believes in. Some players confuse what they as a person believe in with what the fictional character believes in. Especially with new players it's worth mentioning that their character beliefs do not have to align with what the player thinks is right. Part of the fun in roleplaying is taking on traits that one might never express in real life.

In my experience, everyone believes (or wants to believe) that they are in the right. People who are generally held to be evil don't usually consider themselves evil. Far from it. They feel that what they are doing is justified. Hitler was convinced he was doing his part of the world a favor. Obviously he wasn't.

Most people also have a sense of wrong – what they think should be changed or shouldn't be done. A person's sense of right and wrong can change over time as a result of experiences and interactions. This is one of the main elements in character development.

Take Han Solo from *Star Wars* for example. He didn't start out as being the heroic good guy, but by the end of *Return of the Jedi* he certainly was. Anakin Skywalker /Darth Vader began as a good guy, turned into a really bad guy, and ended up reverting back to a good guy in the end. That's character development.

A GM doesn't have to set up complex character development from the outset, and should probably only discuss the idea in advance with experienced roleplayers anyway. But as the character moves through the story, both the player and the Gamemaster should be aware of and communicate to each other the direction the character is evolving.

In this stage of the interview you're looking to get a sense for where the character stands, not a list of every single moral/ethical issue in the universe. Identify five to ten rights and wrongs in the interview.

Point out that these rights and wrongs are going to be acted out in the game by the player, so the player shouldn't be flippant about choosing. Before the player commits to a particular belief for his character take a moment to talk about what that decision might mean for a character and let the player consider the consequences before adopting it. Be especially mindful about the consequences a particular right or wrong might have on other player characters and strongly caution a player against adopting a right or wrong that would put the player at extreme odds with the others. If the difference between different player character beliefs is too great, or a particular belief would lead to strife among the players, point it out and let the player decide how to modify that belief.

The questions are also geared to help the GM determine which camps the players are in before the game starts. If a player doesn't seem like he's going to fit in with the others, find another player.

Once the player takes a position for his character they need to write it down then and there on a Rights and Wrongs Sheet. This sheet will be attached to the standard character sheet required by the game system and be regularly reviewed and updated by the player as the game progresses.

Again, only five or ten rights and wrongs are necessary at the beginning. The following list is just a starting point, but here are some key rights and wrongs to identify, along with the open-ended questions to ask:

Lying: Is it ever okay to misrepresent the truth? Any skeletons in the closet?

Cheating: Does the character ever break the rules? Why?

Stealing: Is it okay to take things? From whom might it be okay?

Killing: How does the character feel about the taking of lives? Under what circumstances might it be acceptable or unacceptable?

Authority: Is the character a control freak or are they most comfortable being directed by others? Are they a righteous upholder of the law? Do they ever question orders?

Regime/Politics: Does the character approve or disapprove of the current governing force? Are they actively protecting or actively trying to replace the current regime? Are they involved in politics at all?

Philosophy: Do the ends justify the means? Are we free to choose our actions or does fate rule our destiny?

The Law: What form of law does the character practice or approve of – anarchy, honor systems/self rule, personal codes, written law? Should one obey and uphold the law without question or should the laws be subject to creative interpretation? Does the character have a personal honor system or set of unique beliefs?

The Unknown: How does the character react to foreigners/aliens? Are they open to new cultures or do they ridicule or fear them? Are things from other cultures to be appreciated or destroyed as heretical?

Other People: How does the character regard other people? With suspicion? As tools and obstacles? With respect? How does the character feel about the rich, the poor, the powerful and the weak?

Habits: Does the character have any particular habits or vices? Are there any habits or vices the character finds morally reprehensible?

Secrets: Does the character have any secrets or secret goals? Why? Under what circumstances might their secret be told?

Class: Where does the character sit in the game setting's class hierarchy? How does the character feel about those in lower classes? Do they ignore them, regard them as animals, look down upon them with contempt or view them with kindness, as under their direct care and responsibility, or in a symbiotic relationship? How about those in the classes above? Do they view them as evil or as something to aspire to?

Campaign Specifics: Say your game involves psionics (extrasensory perceptions like mind reading and clairvoyance) that are considered im-

moral to know and use. Both the GM and player would need to know how the character feels about psionics.

It is perfectly acceptable for a character never to have thought about every single right or wrong listed here. This can make for great roleplaying moments later in the game as the character is suddenly struck with a new concept or insight.

The following two Rights and Wrongs examples are for the same character done in the style of different camps. Neither is better than the other – the GM just needs to be aware of what camp players are in and the potential dangers of mixing players from different camps.

Arlon's Rights and Wrongs, Acting Camp

Arlon has a certain moral flexibility when it comes to lying, cheating, and stealing. He values the goals of the clan over any silly ideas of personal integrity. After all, it's a dog-eat-dog world. He distrusts those not in his clan and is actively hostile to members of rival clans.

Arlon would never duck a fight but would prefer to avoid taking lives unless it was clear he was in mortal danger.

He'd lay his life down for a Clan member and willingly follows orders, but chafes under what he considers the iron boot of the law.

Arlon is on the lower rungs of society, and has a healthy distrust of the wealthy and powerful. He's proud to be part of the clan and although he has no aspirations to improve his standing, his notable deeds keep elevating his status among friends and enemies alike.

Arlon's Rights and Wrongs, Action Camp

Lying, cheating, stealing is okay.

The clan comes before everything else.

Other clans are the enemy.

Killing only as a last resort.

Follow clan orders even if it means death.

The law is often wrong.

The rich can't be trusted.

Low rank in clan, no desire to improve.

Fate seems to have a plan.

Optional: Sins and Virtues

A subset of the Rights and Wrongs Sheet is the *Sins and Virtues Table*. I based this on the Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Contrary Virtues. There is no religious intent here – if this offends you or you’d rather not use it, don’t.

Like the Rights and Wrongs, think of the Sins and Virtues not in terms of good or bad but as starting points for character development. For players, part of the enjoyment in a roleplaying game comes from doing things never possible or considered seriously in real life. Still, if a GM has personal problems with players choosing to play overly sinful or overly virtuous characters, it’s best to discuss it well before the game begins.

When you use this table to help shape a character, remind the player that these beliefs can and should change over time. One can fall from grace, achieve enlightenment, and even continue this cycle over and over again.

Ask the player to look at the following table and circle where they feel their character currently sits on the spectrum of one attitude or another.

Sins and Virtues Table							
Pride	3	2	1	1	2	3	Humility
Envy	3	2	1	1	2	3	Kindness
Gluttony	3	2	1	1	2	3	Abstinence
Lust	3	2	1	1	2	3	Chastity
Anger	3	2	1	1	2	3	Patience
Greed	3	2	1	1	2	3	Charity/Generosity
Sloth	3	2	1	1	2	3	Diligence

Take a Stand

The original version of the above table had a neutral ground. This was a mistake, as some players who used it often chose a lot of neutral ground. For the purposes of roleplaying it is better to have the player take a stand on one side of the spectrum or the other. Extremes are easier to roleplay. A GM might want to consider adding a minimum number of points that need to be spent on Sins and Virtues. Twelve points is a good minimum number. Requiring at least one or two sins or virtues to be ranked a 3 has the same effect.

Arlon's Sins and Virtues	
Pride	3
Envy	1
Abstinence	1
Chastity	1
Anger	3
Charity	1
Diligence	2

Step 4: Back Story

Years ago R. Talsorian's *Cyberpunk* roleplaying game was my first experience with character back story. The system has a player roll against a table of potential life events and create a thumbnail back story for their character. Some of the events lead to advantages, others to disadvantages. Still more are simply events that happen – a professional success or death of a friend.

When I was exposed to this system in the 1980's it totally changed my view about character creation. Now I make every player consider their character's lives before the game and have them create a rough life chart listing at least one significant event for every five years after adulthood. (You know, that grey area somewhere between 10 years old and never.) If the chosen game system doesn't have a back story system, use the *Life Events Table*¹ as a starting point. Some players prefer to roll the dice, others prefer to choose life events. It doesn't matter. Players that prefer to choose are more likely to be Storytellers than Realists, and vice versa.

There are different opinions on giving a new character back story. Some GM's believe that nothing interesting should have happened in a character's life before they begin adventuring. I believe back story is another way for a player to tell the GM what is important to them, and to have a hand in shaping the game. Character back stories make it easier to create adventures.

The player may wish to spend a lot of time filling out the details on each of these life events, or might just want to note down the bare minimums. Either is acceptable, although leaving some details vague leaves the door open for working back story in to the adventure later on.

Typically a player that jots down the minimum might be considered in the Action camp, and the player that goes into more detail is probably in the Acting camp.

¹ Adapted from *Cyberpunk*.

Life Events Table	
1	Death in the family
2	Death of a friend
3	Unhappy love affair
4	Serious injury/illness
5	Lost mentor
6	Financial problem
7	Made an enemy
8	Professional failure
9	Social fallout
10	Nothing special
11	New family member
12	Converted enemy to friend
13	Happy love affair
14	Found mentor
15	Lucky
16	Financial windfall
17	Made a friend
18	Improved status
19	Professional success
20	Heroic deed

Arlon's Back Story		
Age	Result	Event
18th year	Death of a friend	Arlon's close friend was lost in a dockside brawl against a member of the Redknee clan.
19th year	Nothing special	
20th year	Heroic deed	To be determined later in the game.
21st year	Made an enemy	Arlon was betrayed by a wealthy friend and narrowly escaped imprisonment.

Step 5: Friends and Foes Sheet

Now that we have an idea of what the character believes in we start working on the supporting cast of GCs in the character's life. These are the comrades and enemies the character has already made during his life before the game begins. Certainly as a GM you'll update, add, or remove GCs as

the game develops, but to start you need a set of GCs that have a direct relation to each PC before you start putting together the first adventure.

There are two easy places to find friends and foes: the character's Rights and Wrongs list and their Back Story. As you co-create Friends and Foes with the player, encourage the player to imagine friends they'll like and foes they'll hate. Make sure they understand that these are people they will be interacting with during the game, not just worthless words on paper.

Resist the urge to create one of each type of friend and foe listed here. Leave room for the future. At a minimum though, each character *must* have one individually named friend and one individually named foe at the start of a game. Not all Friends and Foes should be individuals; you might just identify the cultural group. For example, Arlon has two Foes to begin with - the Queen (unknown to Arlon at the start of the game) and the entire Redknee Clan.

Types of Friends

There are many types of friends a character may have – this is by no means a comprehensive list. A GM should feel free to blend these types as necessary or add new types.

Never let a character simply have a friend just because they want one or it would be convenient in the game. Make the player justify why their character would have such a friend.

Mentor

Except in high-tech game universes with plug and play skills a la *The Matrix*, a highly skilled person is going to have a mentor who taught them. Mentors not only provide back story but are an excellent resource to return to again and again. Mentors can be a source of information, initial funds, equipment, adventure starts, integral story elements, and the mentor's reputation can even be a source of pride or embarrassment to their students.

Mentors can be well-known and connected or humble and hermetic, alive or dead and any blend in between. A famous, solitary undead teacher? Why not! A mentor doesn't necessarily have to be a full-time patron, and the character may or may not return to each mentor for more knowledge.

Informant

Sherlock Holmes employed street urchins to collect valuable street information. Law enforcement and espionage agents make extensive use of the confidential informant (CI) who provides invaluable (but sometimes unreliable) inside information. Informants may be mysterious, shadowy figures like Deep Throat during the Watergate scandal.

Informants pass on valuable tips and clues to the characters. Sometimes their motivations are strictly monetary, sometimes religious, political or ethical. The player also needs to identify the reasons each informant works with the character.

Merchant

Merchant friends can be a source of rare or inexpensive equipment. Some examples of friendly merchant types: reliable mechanics, doctors, master swordsmiths, apotekers (for sorcery equipment, herbs or medicines). Any character with criminal ties or vices will know a fence (black market buyer/seller). Even games with a military or law enforcement theme with no monetary rewards will have merchants; in this case they're the supply/support people the team will interact with. The character Q from the James Bond series is a perfect example of a supply/support merchant.

Merchants tend to be well-informed in their areas of specialty. Because of this merchants can be a great wellspring of rumors and occasionally a source of jobs. Merchants can often provide referrals to related groups – doctors to lawyers for example, or swordsmiths to military generals.

Merchants serve a crucial role in the game; they give the players ideas about what their characters can spend their hard-earned rewards on. Every team should have at least one.

Ally

An ally is a natural partner in whatever the character does. Adventurers need scholarly allies in universities to help them find treasures, and bounty hunters often make natural allies of cops and bail bondsmen. Politically-oriented adventures often make use of allies who share the same general or short term goals and are willing to provide (often unexpected) assistance in the form of money, equipment, inside information, rescues, or actual help in a tight spot.

I sometimes keep a secret list of a possible ally or two the character hasn't yet met who may assist the player in the future. To keep things more believable though I usually tie a secret ally to a special GC called a Nemesis, as we'll see starting on page 88.

Comrade-in-Arms

The comrade-in-arms is a peer, about as powerful or talented as the character. The character will have grown up with, trained with, worked with, or battled side-by-side with this GC and developed a close relationship.

A comrade-in-arms might be used to start an adventure by calling for help or might be relied on for assistance or information. Comrades-in-arms will frequently put their lives at risk for each other out of honor, personal or military codes, or life debts. Of course, comrades-in-arms can also fall from grace and turn into their opposite, a rival, and attempt to lie, back

stab, cheat, or steal from the character, but we don't need to explain that to the player right now...

Sibling/Family/Clan Member

Few ties are as strong as blood ties. Everyone has a set of parents and may also have siblings or even vast extended clans. If blood ties are chosen for a GC try to leave the details open, as blood ties can always be counted on in a pinch to fire up an adventure.

Patron

The patron is one of the most common friendly GCs. Patrons are used to start adventures, and can be an employer (military or otherwise), an investor, dilettante, chief, or informed and wealthy person who needs things done. In addition to providing a springboard for adventure and information, patrons frequently provide money and equipment to aid the character in exchange for services or a percentage of the profits.

There should be at least one patron GC for the team. Patrons make life a lot easier for the GM.

Types of Foes

As with friends, mix and match as necessary. Some of the best fiction forces foes together against a common enemy, say Elves and Dwarves against Orcs. This technique works well in an RPG after the players have had sufficient game experience to build up a strong negative association with the foe.

When thinking of foes encourage the player to think *big*. If the character is against the government, let the Queen become the foe. Long term foes help focus the actions of players.

Feuder

Families, gangs, cultural groups, businesses, schools of fighting styles and many other associations often develop feuds between an opposing group, sometimes stretching back hundreds or thousands of years. The reasons for a feud may have been lost in the mists of time, be due to conflict over a limited resource, or even caused by a character.

Feuder Types

Type	Example
Family feud	McCoys and Hatfields
Religious feuds	Belfast, Palestine
Territorial feuds	India and Pakistan over Kashmir
Corporate rivalry	Coke vs. Pepsi, Google vs. Microsoft
Gang war	Bloods vs. Crips
Martial arts styles	Various Japanese sword fighting schools of the Tokugawa period
Racial war	Elves vs. Dwarves

Rarely will a simple dirty look or a misheard remark be enough to start a fracas between feuders. Only the bitterest of feuders plunge immediately into lethal combat on sight.

A character involved in a feud presents rich opportunities for roleplaying. Certainly there is a lot of potential for combat, but there can also be plotting, subterfuge, stalking, and taunting involved that add depth and interest to the game world.

A GM should keep a short list of potential feuders ready to spring upon the party should things need spicing up in the game.

Person of Authority

A character may have made an enemy of a powerful Person of Authority (PoA) in a variety of ways. The PoA may not be directly aware of the character (Inigo Montoya and the Six-Fingered Man in *The Princess Bride*) or they may have a long history, as in the case of childhood rivals. They may have crossed swords on the battlefield or in the board room.

Due to their status and power the PoA can bring to bear a wide variety of resources against the character. Rarely will a PoA take direct action, which makes them hard to bring to justice. For this reason the PoA makes an ideal candidate for a Nemesis.²

The PoA may be aware that the player character poses a distant threat, but may be reluctant or simply too busy with more urgent threats to kill them outright. They may know something about the player character that the PC does not; typically that the PC holds some special latent power like the ability to pull the sword from the stone, or has some right to something the PoA has improperly taken for themselves such as land or noble status.

A crafty GM might use a PoA behind the scenes for many sessions. In this way the players may be completely unaware that the evil befalling them comes from a PoA until much later. Perhaps the party has been detained in a prison on trumped-up charges. Unbeknownst to the character, a local magistrate (the PoA) put out a secret order to capture and detain the group.

² See page 88.

Superior

Similar to a PoA, the superior foe is an authority figure that holds (or held) direct power over the character – perhaps a boss, military commander, gang leader, teacher or more powerful/advanced/older student.

The superior foe can play the role of an evil patron, ordering characters into situations he believes they will not survive, using them as pawns, or (and only if the players are okay with it) using coercion or magical means to force the characters to do their bidding. For example, characters could be captured and compelled to perform tasks by a Geas in a fantasy game, a cortex bomb in a high-tech game, or by blackmail in any setting. Forcing characters to obey a GC is an advanced technique that the gang has to be willing to play along with.

Some superior foes can start out as or pretend to be a friendly patron. Obviously, if the GM follows this latter course, the character shouldn't be aware of the superior foe's secret agenda, at least for the first few sessions. This has the potential to backfire, for reasons I cover later. I also caution against taking this approach as a novice GM.

Sibling/Family/Clan Member

Okay, obviously siblings don't always get along. Rarely do family members become bitter enemies; more commonly a person is ostracized by their family or clan for breaking taboos and becomes the black sheep of the family. The player character might play the black sheep or might instead have an outcast, trouble-making sibling that constantly gets the character in trouble, deliberately or otherwise. The black sheep may or may not be able to count on the family/clan if things really go wrong.

Rival/Peer

The rival is the opposite of a comrade-in-arms. Rivals can often be enemies if they are competing for the same thing. Bounty hunters, salesmen, knights on a battlefield, acquaintances vying for the love of another – there are many situations to play with.

Mole

A mole is the opposite of the informant friend; a GC that appears friendly to the team but feeds information to foes. This is a tempting, tricky, advanced role for a GM to play. Moles should not be used unless at least one of the players likes the idea, or the GM risks losing the trust of players.

If a player does suggest a mole as one of their core foes, the GM should go to great lengths to keep the mole in play as long as possible by introducing several other possible moles to keep everyone guessing. Once a mole is identified, it presents an interesting dilemma for characters when they discover they have a mole in their midst; do they feed the mole fake information, take swift vengeance, or try to turn the mole to their side?

Friend and Foe Types	
Friend	Foe
1 Patron	Person of Authority
2 Mentor	Superior
3 Ally	Feuder
4 Comrade-in-Arms	Rival
5 Merchant	
6 Informant	Mole
7 Sibling/Family/Clan Member	

Adding New Friends and Foes During the Game

As a final note on this sheet, the Gamemaster should be careful about adding a new pre-existing relationship to the sheet – unless the relationship is discussed in advance with the player.

If a GM suddenly introduces a character’s long-lost cousin or blood enemy from youth and the player has never heard of this person it is going to break the suspension of disbelief.

“I don’t have a cousin,” the player quips.

“Actually you do,” the GM says, and the whole thing spirals downward from there. Thoughtless moves like this make players angry and resentful.

On the other hand it is perfectly reasonable to add Friends and Foes to the list as the character meets GCs in the game. In fact, I encourage it!

Optional: Woes

A woe is a problem plaguing the character that is serious enough to merit conflict and matched up to one or more foes. A woe gives the player a more active hand in creating at least one adventure and also helps the GM craft adventures that at least one player will enjoy.

If you’re going to use woes in character creation, make absolutely sure you use the woe early in the game – in one of the first handful of sessions if not the first. The larger the role the woe takes in an adventure, the more satisfied the player will be, and the more connected they will feel with their character.

Each woe does need to be paired with a foe, and it’s probably a good idea to limit the number of woes a character has at the start to one or two – they’ll be getting into plenty of trouble once the game begins!

Lastly, the woe should be relatively severe. It needs to be serious enough to spend time on it during the game, and that means something that will create lots of conflict. The type of conflict naturally should reflect the type

of group – action players should have combat-oriented conflict and acting players those that require plenty of heated debate.

It might make sense to look at the character's back story and see if something leaps out. In Arlon's back story there is a perfect match with the betrayal in his 21st year – being wanted by the authorities is a serious worry!

See the *Resident Woes Table* on page 109 for more ideas.

Arlon's Friends, Foes and Woes	
Friends	Relation/Notes
Penchar Hapswitch	Mentor, swordfighting
The Hapswitch Clan	Blood ties
Foes	
The Redknee Clan	Feuder
The Queen	PoA (secret, not revealed to Arlon's player)
Woes	
Betrayed by friend and escaped imprisonment	Now wanted by authorities

Step 6: Goal Sheet

Both the player and GM are now starting to get a sense for the character. The character has a list of Rights and Wrongs, some back story, and a good number of Friends and Foes. Now it is time to craft the most important list – the Goal Sheet.

Approach this next sheet by letting the player know that this list will be the game's backbone. The Goal Sheet isn't something to be taken lightly or jotted down on the spur of the moment. Give the player lots of time to think through their desires and goals for their character.

Goals should be as clear and specific as possible. If a player says "I want to be a spy," it's a great start. But more is needed. What kind of spy? Someone who uses lots of gadgets and takes down world-class villains – a James Bond type? Or more of a *Mission Impossible* type spy who impersonates a key figure and causes an unlikely change? Until the GM gets more information the goal is subject to misinterpretation.

Whatever the goals are it is the GM's job to ensure both the players and GM will enjoy achieving them. If you don't want to run a game revolving around, say, supporting a fascist government you'd better tell the player and let them work up an alternative goal.

It's also important to verify that the rules allow the PC to someday be capable of these goals! Say the player chooses a Cleric but wants to become the greatest swordsman in the land. *D&D* rules don't allow Clerics to use swords. Or a player may have created a character with relatively poor dexterity but really wants to accomplish acrobatic feats. If you uncover something that the player wants to achieve that the character won't be able to accomplish, go back and adjust the character, or discuss and modify the goal with the player. Let the player know that they can change their character at this stage if they want. Novice players sometimes don't understand that they can change their minds after they've started the process. This can leave them feeling trapped and upset about a wrong character choice. It's always better to find out about this before the GM begins play, so don't hesitate to change the character, tweak the rules, whatever it takes. The player has to be excited about playing.

Sometimes the process of goal-setting leads to major character changes. If this happens the GM may want to have the player totally re-create this fictional person to better match the player's desired goals. Early in the game, say the first 5-8 sessions, just keep the character name and make the changes. If a major change is necessary after then, let the player take their old character out in a blaze of glory and introduce their new character in the same session.

As the GM works out a list of goals, he should be thinking hard about how these goals will work in his game setting. If you have any adventure brainstorm, write them down privately. You will probably think of general ideas about the game world that you share with the player on the spot. As always, immediately write down what you tell the player.

Goal Types

The objective is to define a good mix of goals in the interview – short, medium, and long term. The more detailed the better, though some can be as simple as getting more money or experience. Goals will change over the lifetime of a character, sometimes radically, so players ought to know this list isn't being carved into stone, nor is it an absolute guarantee that everything listed is going to happen.

Shoot for at least three short, one medium and one long term goal in the interview.

Some examples:

Short Term

- Get a better suit of armor
- Learn new spells
- Get off this planet
- Join the rebellion
- Find a job

- Get into a brawl
- Take down some bad guys

Medium Term

- Convert as many unbelievers to the PCs belief as possible
- Meet an Elf
- Buy a starship (or pay off an existing one)
- Become a famous swordsman
- Wander the Earth, *Kung-Fu* style
- Rescue (a person I know) from enslavement

Long Term

- Overthrow the regime
- World domination
- Crush the rebellion
- Retire in incredible luxury
- Find my true father/mother

Scan the list and ensure that the character has, or can someday learn, what they need in order to accomplish their goals. Make adjustments if necessary.

Goals for Advanced Roleplayers

Generally the more advanced a player is, the more complex their character will be. As long as the GM is prepared to work with the player and lay out opportunities for these character quirks and complexities, go for it.

Goals that don't make sense on the face of it can make for deep and engaging story arcs. For example, a rampaging warrior may have a deep and passionate goal of world peace. These are the goals of an advanced roleplayer and ought not be attempted by the novice GM or player.

Arlon's Goals

Short term:

- Get some better equipment
- Become involved in worthy brawls and battles

Medium term:

- Cause pain or embarrassment to the Redknee clan
- Get rich!

Long term:

- Remove the Queen from power

Step 7: Quirks and Traits

The last list focuses on the final details, the things that help to differentiate the character. Encourage the player to practice getting into the role, to try the role on by actually speaking as the character. If you are working with a new player make several positive suggestions that will help the player bring this character to life. Here are a few:

Adopt an Accent

Accents are natural to adopt in roleplaying. They reinforce that the character is speaking (as opposed to the player) and can be a heck of a lot of fun. If you have players who aren't used to speaking with some kind of accent, encourage them to experiment. Even a hokey accent is usually better than none. Encourage even the smallest efforts and lead by example.³

Cook Up a Temperament

Discuss the character's temper and settle on a certain kind of temperament. Are they cool and collected, nervous, stoic, silly, aggressive, impulsive? Temperament is generally easy for players to roleplay, so as GM find ways to encourage displaying temperament during play.

Take on Some Mannerisms

Well-rounded characters have mannerisms. These can be certain words or turns of phrase, nervous tics, ways they hold their arms – the list is endless. Some memorable mannerisms: Spock's raised eyebrow, Yoda's sentence structures, James Bond's deadpan wisecracks. If the player needs ideas, show them the *Table of Mannerisms* on page 147.

Adopt a Few Weaknesses

Every character needs at least one weakness. Superman would have been dull without Kryptonite and his secret identity.

If the GM wants a truly great game, he should insist on each character adopting a weakness. Weaknesses round out a character and give the GM something to work with – a button to push.

One thing I really like about Steve Jackson's *GURPS* system is the way they handle weaknesses (they call them *disadvantages*). Basically they allow the player to get more power by taking on different kinds of weakness. Even if you don't plan on running *GURPS* as the rules system it is worth looking at their excellent descriptions of different kinds of weaknesses. If nothing else, the system can be used as a springboard for discussion and ideas.

³ See page 190 for ideas on how to improve accents.

A GM should limit the number of weaknesses per character to at most two, and make sure the player knows they will always be held accountable to consistently roleplaying their weaknesses in the game. They must know that the GM will be exploiting any weaknesses to their disadvantage.

The second thing to watch out for is a weakness that will make the game dull, frustrating or hard to manage. Pacifism or cowardice in a group of Action players, for example. Consider the other players - will it be fun for everyone if one player has a character who is always socially inappropriate?

Lastly, the GM must be wary of players choosing disadvantages that will reduce their interaction with others and push them to the background. Lazy, shy, timid, mute and/or deaf characters are examples to avoid.

There are four different areas of weaknesses that in my experience make for interesting, fun roleplaying: Physical, Belief-based, Social, and Psychological.

Physical. Any sort of physical handicap can be used as a weakness - poor vision, a missing limb, even old age. Physical weaknesses tend to be more appropriate for Action players, because the challenges the character will face during a game revolve more around action than interaction. They're the easiest to create challenging situations for during a game.

Belief-based. What a character believes in can be a weakness, because some beliefs will compel them to behave in a certain way. Nationalism, codes of honor, and fundamentalism are examples of belief-based weaknesses. These beliefs are also ideal for Action players and tend to get a character in lots of trouble.

Social. This category of weakness comes as a result of one's social standing. For example, poor education, illiteracy, or being in a minority group. They're often chosen by intermediate or advanced Acting players because they are interesting and challenging to portray without limiting combat actions or compelling certain behavior.

Psychological. Most psychological weaknesses are extremely challenging to roleplay and easy to forget. Addictions, compulsive behavior, or severe psychological issues like split personalities and schizophrenia should only be adopted by highly experienced players and GMs. For everyone else, limit these weaknesses to an extreme of the *Sins and Virtues Table* or a phobia, say a fear of the dark or heights.

Wear Some Clothing

You might suggest that the *player* wear a hat, a certain kind of jacket or sunglasses, even a wig to games. Some people are more receptive to this than others. Using costumes yourself encourages others to do the same.

Arlon's Quirks & Traits

Heavy Scottish accent
 Aggressive, unpredictable temperament
 Tends to drink too much – and he's a violent drunk

Step 8: Put the Character into the Game System

At this point the player has all four lists, a back story, and a fairly good sense for who this fictional person is. Only now do we go through the character creation process specified in the chosen game system.

Do not follow the rules for character generation if the rules tell you to use dice or a set formula in any aspect of character creation. I realize that the vast majority of rules for RPGs tell you to use dice or some other formula, but these methods don't produce great characters. (Here I go again, up on the player interview soapbox.)

Instead of leaving a player character to chance, look at the character as a whole. Open the rulebook on character creation, lay out a blank character sheet and ask the *player* – what physical statistics, skills, wealth, schooling, and other advantages or disadvantages are appropriate for this character?

Let the player explain what should be appropriate, and don't be shy about saying "No" if the character is shaping up to be too powerful for the beginning of a game, or unbalanced in relation to other characters.

If a GM is working with players from the Realist camp, he may be more comfortable following the character generation rules verbatim, but I still advise against it. Why? Because if a player wanted to play a rough and tough fighter and the physical stats he randomly rolled make the character a weakling, everyone just wasted their time.

Let's say a player doesn't get the kind of character he wanted with a random roll. What's a more likely scenario – the player becomes strongly connected to his character and plays the role to the limit – or the player takes careless actions with this unwanted character?

Players and GM alike are looking to achieve maximum fun here. Are there limits? Sure. Maximum fun rarely means maxing out stats *and* starting skills. Except in rare cases, beginning characters should have powerful *stats* but low-level *skills*. Thus a player character starts out with the ingredients of a hero *except* experience – an above-average character in physical and mental attributes with more than the usual assortment of basic skills.

Unless you're running a game that will only last one session keep starting skills at their lowest level, otherwise there isn't anything to work towards. If a player is having trouble deciding where to cut back, ask them to rank stats or skills by importance and assign the numbers yourself.

Carefully and deliberately the player is guided through filling out the character sheet by the GM who makes sure that the player's vision is

matched by what's on the paper. This process creates a character the player will enjoy playing.

Min/Maxers

Min/Maxers are players that optimize their character to squeeze out every last advantage in a game system. Min/Maxing often starts during character creation when the player spends lots of time obsessively reading the rules, looking for ways to make the "best" beginning character. If you see one of your players doing this, congratulations, you have a player who is interested in playing! Encourage them to make the most of the system.

Some GMs get upset by this behavior, an attitude stemming from the same misconception that roleplaying games are like board or wargames; that is, they have winners and losers. Great GMs, on the other hand, want their players to feel powerful and heroic.

If min/maxing makes the player happy, great. If a GM thinks a player is getting bored because their min/maxing has made actions too easy for them, all the GM has to do is ratchet up the difficulty.

Superpowers

Some game systems allow players to take on extraordinary powers. Superhero-based games revolve around them, but many game systems include superpowers. A superpower is any single highly unusual ability that cannot be learned and does not depend on technology or outside supernatural forces. So for example, the ability to fly without the use of a spell, magic item or aircraft is a superpower. Any form of extrasensory perception (aka ESP, psionics) is a superpower. So the ability to read minds without magical or technological means would also be a superpower. Likewise, the undead such as vampires and shapeshifters like werewolves have superpowers. On the other hand magic-using characters do not, for their powers (typically) are taught.

Superpowers are great. Players love them. Superpowers are fun for the GM as well, but they are tricky to work with. Novice GMs should wait until they get a few games under their belt before they allow the player characters to have superpowers.

Game Effect

Consider the impact a specific power will have on the game. Is this really a superhero game? Will any other players feel jealous or underpowered and

require their own powers to maintain balance? Imagine how you might use this power yourself if you were the character and then think about how that might create unexpected challenges for you as Gamemaster. Take a look at the *Table of Challenges* beginning on page 99. Which kinds of obstacles will have to be scratched off this list because they can be overcome with ease?

What Powers the Superpower?

One of the greatest challenges with superpowers is figuring out how to keep it fun. The fact that Superman never seems to get tired may be great for comic books, but it presents a real problem for GMs. Just imagine how difficult it will be to keep things challenging (meaning fun) for a player whose character can *always* read minds.

So think about the power source of the superpower. The most manageable superpowers have limited uses with long recharge times. That may not be possible or desirable. Adjust the duration, frequency and accuracy of the power to maximize fun; during the middle of the session if necessary.

Latent or Limited Powers

Particularly if multiple superpowers are involved you might grant the superpower to the character but keep the talent *latent* – that is, unavailable – until a future date. When the power finally manifests, start off with severe limits: keep the duration short, the range limited, the effect small, and the result unpredictable. The length, distance, power and stability improves as the character improves.

Superweaknesses

Every superpower deserves a matching superweakness. Make the superweakness concrete and absolute, not mental or personality-based. These are just normal weaknesses and are no substitute for what I call a superweakness.

A superweakness is a device that the GM uses to severely depower a character, thereby balancing their superpower. Aim for a weakness that will introduce drama or conflict into the game. The degree of weakness should match the strength of the power - a character that can fly might require a drug they must regularly take to stay alive. Compare that to a character with the mere power to climb any wall; they might require eating a live spider before they can climb again.

GCs can be used as a superweakness, provided the player is on board with doing everything possible to protect a GC. For example, Superman would do anything to protect Lois Lane. Thus the GM could always capture or threaten Lois' life to counterbalance his awesome strength. Superman's secret identity is less of a superweakness, as it is difficult for a GM to exploit.

Blocking Superpowers

Lastly, each superpower should have a natural block; a situation where the superpower just won't work. It might be a time of day, an environmental condition, an object, the presence of something or someone - as long as the block isn't absurdly unusual - say on alternating leap years. Again I'll use the Superman and Kryptonite analogy.

The block should probably be known by the player before the game starts, unless the power is latent. In this case, part of the fun might be discovering the block at the wrong moment!

The block is a secret that a foe can discover, introducing a lot of fun. Let the player decide who else knows about the block, including other players and GCs. If the block isn't likely to be discovered, at least one GC should also know about the block, or the block may be useless to you as a GM.

Step 9: Starting Equipment

At this point the character is complete, except for a starting set of equipment.

Most game systems are packed with goodies that will have the players salivating. Whether it is some arcane Artifact, a magical sword, high tech piece of equipment or just plain gold, most roleplayers are highly motivated by booty.

Some players are going to feel completely naked and useless unless they start out with huge amounts of gear. In a fantasy campaign this might look like a complete suit of Adamantine Ethereal Elven plate armor, a +5 Dancing Vorpal Vampiric Flametongue Blade of Sharpness, a six-pack of extra healing potions and a rusty dagger - all this before the game even starts.

It is unwise for a GM to give in to these demands and hand out powerful equipment at the start of a campaign. If the GM does, he makes his job nearly impossible. If the good stuff is handed out early, the players won't value the items as much. The GM also sets himself up for problems down the line - how does one materially reward a character who has everything?

The best campaigns start out with characters having the bare minimum of money and equipment. It is totally reasonable to start characters out nearly penniless and without even a dagger. The players will put value on that shoddily made, unbalanced, battered and nicked longsword if their character *first* had to walk around a scary part of town late at night with only their bare hands to defend themselves. An added bonus - if the team has no money they will be more willing to accept dangerous assignments. Fun!

Pets and Familiars

You're almost guaranteed that one player will ask if they can have some kind of pet that comes along on adventures. Common requests include a dog, robot, fairy, horse, or bird, even a dragon.

Players need to understand you'll be making use of the pet in ways they might not have considered. They may become lost, imperiled or threatened by events or GCs. They may slow a party down that is trying to hurry. They may be wounded or even die.

Pets can sometimes be inconvenient for adventurers on the move. Does the party take the dog into the dungeon or leave it behind at the entrance to fend for itself? Do they try to bring it into the pub? How will foreign cultures react?

Players also must understand the GM will roleplay their pets (or any other characters but their own for that matter). Treat pets as GCs and give them lots of personality. They should react to the world around them, including the actions and requests of the party.

Certainly any pets, familiars, or pack animals should be given their own unique spirit. They can be temperamental, energetic, or somewhat wild. They may even help the adventure along. Whatever personality the GM and players decide, note it down and bring it up when appropriate.

Action Framework

Some players, especially novice or Action players, may want to skip the character creation process. These players prefer to start with a simpler framework and build on their character as the game progresses. Heck, you may want a faster character creation process, or want to give the players more time to settle into their characters.

It is tempting to let players skip meaningful character creation and just stick to the game system's character generation system. At the very least a subset of the character creation process is necessary or the game is probably not going to be fun.

The Action Framework creates just enough character detail to make the game relevant and interesting to the player. The more detail you can gather about a player's character, the more options you will have for creating

adventures, the easier it will be to prepare for a session and gamemaster on the fly, and the more fun everyone will have.

With the Action Framework character creation work is spread over many sessions. This approach does require the GM to take a few minutes after each session to expand each player character, making sure there is enough detail to seed the next session. Always record changes on their character sheets and make a copy for yourself.

1. Define the character's profession
2. Decide on one or two rights and wrongs
3. Make one friend and one foe
4. Lay out one or two short term goals
5. Attach a single quirk or trait
6. Put the character into the game system
7. Figure out starting equipment

Summary: The Nine Steps to Character Creation

1. Define the character's profession
 - Cover all possible choices
2. Create a rough outline
 - One or two paragraphs
3. Decide on rights and wrongs
 - Between five to ten to start
4. Determine a back story
 - At least one event for each five years of character adulthood
5. Make a list of friends and foes
 - Create at least two of each
 - Try to tie foes to character wrongs
 - Try to tie friends and foes to back story
6. Lay out some goals
 - Three short, one medium, and one long to start
7. Attach some quirks and traits
 - Come up with one or two to begin with
8. Put the character into the game system
 - Avoid randomization; match player desires
 - Focus on strong foundations with weak experience
9. Figure out starting equipment
 - Allow only the bare minimum

Luck Points

Back in 1982, TSR published a roleplaying game called *Top Secret*. Each character had a small, non-replenishing number of luck points. A player could use a luck point to immediately re-roll *any* die roll. Even the roll of a Gamemaster or another player was fair game. Several game systems like *7th Sea* improved this tradition.

I like luck points because they tend to encourage bolder, more heroic action. They give the GM one more backup system to rescue characters. They make players feel more in control – and it's *fun* to be in control.

When used, work the new result into the flow of the action:

“Just when it looks as if the evil Dr. Z’s electronic remote control giant death poodle of vast and curly-haired doom is certain to crush the player with its mighty slobbering jaws, a freak burst of radio interference causes the enormous furry head to swerve away at the last second, teeth clamping down on nothing but air. You hear a curse from behind the curtain as Dr. Z maneuvers the robo-pooch for another attack...”

There are many variations on this concept – some systems give players influence or control over the outcome of events, the ability to add personal history or skills mid-game, and so on. I give each player one luck roll per session with one catch; if any player reminds another to use their luck roll during a session, all the players lose their luck points for that session.

Make a Copy

Once the character is complete, make a copy of everything for yourself. Never under any circumstances let the player say “I’ll work on this and get back to you,” because chances are they won’t. That means you will have to hound them, which starts things off on the wrong foot. No matter how unfinished it is, take what’s already done, make a copy and get the original back to the player.

If you get any resistance about the character not being done, point out that their character’s back story isn’t set in stone, and in fact the less finished it is, the more possibilities for fun later.

If they simply must work on their character, set up another time to complete the character and make a copy anyway so you can get started on the first session.

Arlon's Frontiers Character Sheet**Stats**

Age:	22
Strength:	Well above average
Dexterity:	Above average
Intelligence:	A little below average
Constitution:	Well above average
Social Class:	Low Merchant
Willpower:	Average

Skills

Assault rifle:	Basic training
Pistol:	Basic training
Zero-G/EVA:	Basic experience
Ship's cannon:	Trained
Computer:	Novice
Zerodo: (zero-g martial arts)	School trained, scuffles but no real street experience

Equipment

Hand-me-down military grade envirosuit
550 Alliance credits

Arlon's Anneborn Character Sheet

Stats

Age:	22
Strength:	Well above average
Dexterity:	Above average
Intelligence:	A little below average
Constitution:	Well above average
Social Class:	Low Merchant
Willpower:	Average

Skills

Swordsmanship:	Apprenticed
Dagger:	Basic use
Brawling:	No formal training, basic
Sailing:	Basic experience
Ship's cannon:	Trained
Sailing:	Trained

Equipment

Hand-me-down chainmail shirt
5 pieces of silver, 10 coppers

Now Repeat

Go through all of these steps for each character before proceeding. Once all players have completed their characters, gather up all of the character information and lock yourself away. The next parts of game creation, all the way up to the start of the game session, are done by the GM only.

Part II

PREPPING FOR THE GAME SESSION

Chapter 5

GM-only Character Information

From this point on, the rest of your work should not be shared with the players out-of-game. It should only be revealed in-game with descriptions, acting, and through supporting materials like drawings and maps.

GC Cards

Player characters aren't the only characters in the game. The GM plays the parts of a whole bunch of other characters. Traditionally these are called Non-Player Characters (NPCs), although many other names are used. In this book I'm calling them Gamemaster Characters (GCs).

"Core GCs" are all the people mentioned on the Friends and Foes Sheets for every player character. Always try to use Core GCs first in any situation that arises – both as you plan the adventure as well as during spontaneous gameplay.

Why? Three good reasons. First, because this is what the players told you they want. Second, it makes for a more believable game. Third, it makes prep a lot easier.

Each of the Core GCs needs just a little more detail at this point. Take out each Friends and Foes Sheet for all the characters in the game. Give each Friend and every Foe their own piece of paper. I call this a GC Card, and it is used to help craft adventures before the game starts, to record important events and give you ideas for spontaneous gameplay during the game session.

Index cards (3x5 cards) are great for GC Cards. You can easily move them around when thinking about adventures and flip through the GCs quickly during the game. Some GCs end up becoming involved in a lot of game sessions and eventually fill up more than a single 3x5, but you can still use a 3x5 for them during prep even if you have written out full character sheets for them. Cards are easier to manage in a session.

Here's what to include on each GC Card:

- Name
- Occupation
- Society
- Social class

- A Visual first impression¹
- A Mannerism²
- Basic skills
- Goals
- Secrets (optional)
- Foes (optional)
- Woes (optional – use the *Resident Woes Table*³ or make up your own)
- Notes

You might add secrets at this point if you have discussed them with the player, or if you have a great idea before you begin prep. You might add an additional GC if something obvious strikes you. Say a character has a Mentor GC, you might create a GC Card for the Mentor's foe, even though the idea of a foe was never discussed with the player.

Adding a woe for the GC creates an easy path to a new adventure and gives the GC more depth. A woe creates an instant bargaining tool – the GC says, "Sure I'll help you, if you help me with my problem."

GC Card

FRIEND:	ALLY
Name:	Doople McDougle
Occupation:	Mercenary, 2nd level
Society:	West Anneborn
Class:	Mercenary
Visual:	Bushy eyebrows
Mannerism:	Always munching on something
Skills:	Sword fighting, crossbow, horsemanship, survival
Goals:	Own a legendary sword, make a name in the world
Secrets:	Gambling habit, owes 10gp to loan shark
Foes:	Zarlon the Wizard, Pwego the loan shark
Woes:	Pwego put a bounty on his head due to missed payments

Arlon and Doople worked side-by-side
when Doople was a mercenary for the clan

¹ See page 143.

² See page 147.

³ See page 109.

Keep adding new GC cards over time of course, but this small number of Core GCs should be enough for several sessions of play. Stay familiar with the Core GCs so you're ready to pull one out when an opportunity arises.

Skill Use Cards

Before a GM springs an obstacle on the characters he has to know that the team has the skills to overcome it. This may be obvious, but less obviously, a GM has to structure game sessions so that everyone has an opportunity to exercise *all* of their different skills over time. They may choose not to, but at least the GM has created the opportunity!

As a player I've been in a lot of so-so games where I never had a chance to evoke a cool spell or use a neat skill that my character had. It's a shame, because I was always waiting and hoping I'd have the chance... and it never came. Seriously, it's been *years* in some cases and I'm still miffed about it. On the other hand, one of my favorite games had my character using every bit of his spells and skills. In one obstacle he *shapechanged* into a mouse, cast *flying carpet* then *shrink* on the carpet, then flew the carpet (as a mouse) into a small hole in a vault to pick the lock using *telekinesis*! Don't disappoint your players. If it's on their character sheet, you have to give them chances to *use* it.

Start by going over each character's sheet – note down each skill, spell, or talent they have, one skill per 3x5 card. Underneath the skill think up several ways the skill might be used in the game.

When you write these up try to think of situations where a character might use the skill in a way that calls attention to their contribution to the party – a way for them to take center stage and play an important role. As GM, you want to provide variations and different opportunities each session for everyone, and doing a little brainstorming up front on each card helps that process greatly.

Two of Arlon's Skill Use Cards

Arlon: Assault Rifle

- Suppressing (covering) fire
- Marksman-like distance shot
- Intimidation
- Diversion

Arlon: Spacesuit

- Repair exterior damage
- Manual release of something stuck
- Emergency re-entry
- No-tether boarding
- Placing homing beacon/listening device
- Hiding

Example Skill Use Cards for Other Characters

Morihei: Aikido (martial art)

- Defend against multiple attackers
- Neutralize or immobilize attacker
- Escape from a hold or pin
- Disarm an opponent
- Evade or dodge an attack
- Redirect physical attack on attacker or other person
- Throw
- Roll or break a hard fall

Musashi: Swords (florentine)

- Use against multiple enemies
- Use to dissuade others from combat
- Identifies status as Ronin
- Sparring match

Legolas: Bow

- Taking out a distant/hidden foe
- Fire arrow for signaling or arson
- Rope arrow

Lando: Negotiation

- Disarming a delicate situation with words
- Talking someone out of information
- Bluffing

Landru: Stealth

- Reconnaissance

- Eavesdrop
- Hide when everyone else is found

Shewel: Magic Missile Spell

- Against a hidden or well-protected foe
- Break an object
- Make a signal

Skill uses are not always earth-shattering, but each character has to have a chance to do *something* noteworthy each session. This is one of the most important rules of being a GM. Always, always remember this. Even if you have to make something up during the session, see to it that every character gets adequate time in the spotlight every single session.

Some character types are easy – for fighter-type characters you can always set up a brawl. But other types can be harder. Merchants need opportunities to trade, thieves need a chance to sneak or steal, and wizards need a chance to work their wizardry. Combat may not be satisfying to a non-combat oriented character. After all, if they were satisfied with combat, they'd be playing a combat-oriented character.

Look beyond the obvious. For example, combat skills don't always have to be used against foes in a match to the death. You might have a patron insist that a character prove themselves by sparring with the bosses' bruiser. Or you might set up a situation where a character finds an unexpected job after beating up on a bosses' cronies who unjustly attacked him.

If you have got newbies, encourage the players to see ways they can use their skills in many different situations, so that when the time comes they'll be better equipped to deal with any challenge they face in the game.

Goal Cards

Now take all of the Goal Sheets and Rights and Wrongs Sheets for the team and start looking for similar and divergent goals among characters. Don't worry about prioritizing them. For now you just want to record them all so you can later quickly generate new adventure ideas that match what the players want.

Write down *every* goal that each character has, no matter how small, on its own 3x5 card. Whenever you find a similar or divergent goal with another character, note it down on each character's Goal Card. If it makes sense, link GCs already created to Goal Cards. For example, if a character had a goal to improve their martial arts, and a Mentor GC that was a martial artist, note down the Mentor's name on the Goal Card.

Keep the Goal Cards sorted by character. I use colored 3x5 cards, one color per PC to make the job easier.

Arlon's Goal Cards

Short Term

Be recognized by others as a powerful individual

- Conflict with other players who want this too
 - Rival Uuntwo considers Arlon a weakling
-

Avoid being arrested by the evil empire

- PoA Magistrate actively seeking to imprison player
-

Learn to be a better pilot

Seek Mentor Carrybon

Get better in fights

- Shewel hates it when Arlon gets into brawls
-

Medium Term

Avenge the mistreatment of my ancestors by the evil empire

Get a really cool starship

Get rich!

Long Term

Put down the evil empire

Team Goal Cards

At the start of an adventure it's best to create only one team goal: "Bring the team together." At the conclusion of the first game session, and every following session thereafter, work with the players and add to this list.⁴

⁴ See page 289, The Post-game Review.

The team as a whole will also have goals that might differ from individual characters. In either case, use the Team Goal Cards the same way you use the character Goal Cards.

RP Cards

Looking over all of the character goals at once will bring to light divergent goals – things that one player’s character wants that another does not, or goals that are at odds.

Imagine you look over all of this information and discover that all of the characters may want to get rich, but they may disagree on how. Perhaps one character is opposed to the idea of material wealth, yet has goals that require a lot of wealth to achieve. That’s a great opportunity to set up a situation where the characters have to make tough decisions; in this case “do the ends justify the means?”

Wherever you can think of a situation that the characters would be at odds, note that down on its own card, the RP (as in RolePlaying) Card. These situations spur debate and action, which drives character development and interaction as the game progresses. Most of the goals among a team should be similar. The characters must cooperate for the game to be successful. Only a small number should be divergent; these small differences enhance the feeling of individuality.

Start by looking over Goal Cards, Rights and Wrongs and Core GCs for the team. Make a card for each disagreement that might arise between PCs. You might end up with three or four cards.

If you can’t find any disagreements among any of the characters, go back and get more information from the players. Say one character believes in fighting for the underdog and the other characters didn’t note anything down about that, find out how the other characters feel.

Avoid using leading questions like, “Does your character feel like underdogs are wimps?” Instead ask an open-ended question like “How does your character feel about people who are weaker than you?” If a GM pushes a player into adopting a character view that will bring him into conflict with another it could easily lead to bad feelings.

During the game the GM uses the RP cards to set up or recognize scenes that will push character’s buttons and get them interacting with GCs and each other.

One example RP Card involves the back story of one character and the friend of another. Our example character’s back story includes a betrayal by a wealthy friend; because of this the character believes the rich cannot be trusted. This character, Arlon, also has a goal to make money. Yes, it’s a contradiction. Happens all the time in real life too. Shewel, another character, has a wealthy friend for a patron, the Marquis of Yarlen, whom she respects a great deal. Shewel also desires to become rich.

Whenever the team is interacting with Shewel's wealthy patron the Marquis, talking about him, or doing a job for him, you have an RP situation that could be played out. Arlon's player has to figure out what his character will do; grudgingly trust the Marquis or try to lead the team into rebellion against him? There is no correct answer.

The second example takes opposing Rights and Wrongs between characters. Arlon believes it is wrong to steal, Shewel does not. Set up a situation that appears impossible unless Shewel steals something. Perhaps a GC promises to let the team into the castle to rescue Arlon's mentor Penchar only if they steal the baker's secret recipe. What will Arlon do? Again, there is no correct answer.

As the GM and players become more familiar with the hot buttons that trigger conflict, it becomes a lot of fun to set up situations and see how they play out. Knowing this, keep adding RP cards as you think of them. Toss out the RP Cards that the players don't react to, and enhance and expand those that excite and involve them.

RP Cards

1. Arlon distrusts the rich but Shewel respects her wealthy patron.
 - What happens when the team gets a great opportunity from the patron? How will Arlon resolve conflict between need for money and distrust of the wealthy?
2. Shewel believes it is okay to steal but Arlon doesn't.
 - What happens when Arlon observes Shewel stealing? Arlon must choose between allowing the theft or (possibly) failing the objective.

Congratulations! At this point most of the time consuming work is done. Now a solid foundation has been built that greatly reduces your pre-game work.

For a three or four person game you should have invested about four to eight hours at this point, most of it interacting with players. That's somewhere between zero and six hours more than one might spend just rolling up characters according to the rules of your chosen system. But once you have done this bit of extra work, actual prep time for a full four to eight hour game session is about an *hour*, sometimes much less.

Chapter 6

Creating the Adventure

Now that the players all have well-developed characters and you've got your source material and Core GCs together, you are finally ready to begin crafting the first adventure.

Simply speaking, the GM must now set up a series of challenges that allow the characters to advance themselves towards the goals they want to achieve.

I strongly caution against going out and using a pre-packaged adventure at this point. Unless a GM is incredibly lucky or does a lot of modification, the adventure purchased won't advance the goals of the characters, leaving the players frustrated. Pre-packaged scenarios do have their place, and we'll talk about where later.

Crafting an adventure shouldn't take long – just *reading* one of those pre-packaged adventures takes longer than creating an intense adventure that will have your players engaged and craving for more!

Over-prepping

Many claim that running a great game requires dozens of hours of off-game effort from the Gamemaster. Hogwash.

If a GM follows this system, makes smart use of source material and concentrates on giving the players what they want, prep for a game is nearly effortless. It becomes a few minutes of brainstorming before the real fun begins – the actual session.

Getting ready for the first session takes a little more effort, but after that if a GM finds himself putting in more than an hour prepping for a session something is wrong!

Dungeon Crawls

Dungeon crawls are the lowest form of roleplaying. They are trivial to create, but also terminally dull. These days a dungeon crawl just can't compete. Dungeon crawls are the roleplaying equivalent of bad formula movies. They don't satisfy.

Here's the dungeon crawl formula:

1. Encounter a challenging monster
2. Kill monster
3. Divide up the goodies
4. Repeat, throwing in the occasional trap

That might have worked back in the early 70s when acceptable cinematic special effects included guys dressed up in rubber suits fighting styrofoam models on wires. Back when the state-of-the art in video games rendered enemies in 16 blocky, monochrome pixels we could get away with less.

Today that 16 pixel dragon looks more like a duck. People laugh uproariously at the special effects in movies of that age.

So why run your game on 70's principles?

Avoid the Traditional Three Act Adventure

The three act formula is the most well-known and frequently used model in novels, plays, radio, movies and television. It looks like this:

Act 1: We introduce the characters

Act 2: Characters face and overcome conflict

Act 3: Final climactic ordeal, celebration and wrap up

By this time I've lost count of the books and articles I've read that encourage Gamemasters to follow a three act formula when setting up an adventure. I can't think of worse advice. GMs should never, ever use a three act formula! Roleplaying games have a beginning but they don't have middles and ends. Three act models simply don't work in this medium because they have no mechanism to handle the chaos and collaboration inherent in roleplaying.

RPGs have a flow that is completely different from other forms of drama. They are more complex and dynamic – they jump from one storyline or adventure to another and frequently go in completely unexpected directions. There *is* a structure to an RPG adventure, although it is more of a controlled chaos. We'll start with the most important element, conflict.

Conflict

Conflict is the source of all drama. Without conflict there is no tension, no entertainment. Without conflict you have a monologue, a lecture, a foregone conclusion. What that means is bored players.

Keep conflict in your game at every twist and turn and you will have an outstanding game on your hands.

CvO not PvG

Don't think of conflict as being *Player vs. Gamemaster (PvG)*. Think of conflict as being *Character vs. Obstacle (CvO)*, where the obstacle is anything the player characters must overcome. Most of the time the conflict will be PCs against GCs. If the players want to engage in a little conflict between their characters, that's great too. Sometimes the conflict will be between the PCs and inanimate objects like traps.

If you take only one thing away from this book, make it this: the gamemaster is on the same side as the players.

Players and gamemaster are not on opposite sides, nor is the gamemaster neutral. True, some GCs will seek to thwart the goals of the adventurers, but other GCs will help them. Some situations such as traps may cause the player characters harm, delay them or otherwise frustrate them, but other plot devices will help, speed them up or give them joy.

The players and the gamemaster are on the same side - the winning side if you will. The player's characters *should* win - they're the heroes after all! And when the team wins the gamemaster wins.

Obstacles, Sessions, Adventures and Campaigns

Obstacles

In an RPG, the *obstacles* are the points of conflict. Each short term objective or barrier to success in an RPG is an obstacle. Simply speaking, the characters are out to do something and the Gamemaster presents obstacles that they eventually overcome. Each obstacle is a single, focused thing that blocks the team's path to victory. The obstacle itself is broken up into three stages that we'll cover shortly.

Most of our prep time will be spent on obstacles, and most of the game time will be occupied with them as well, yet they're quite simple to create and administer.

The Session

The *session* is a single block of continuous real time that the RPG is played. It might be two hours or twelve hours, but it's a mostly uninterrupted block of time. Of course people will take breaks to eat and perform other biological necessities – those short breaks don't count.

A single game session should have many obstacles, most of which should be successful. Success makes players feel powerful. It's fun to succeed.

If the team isn't overcoming several obstacles in a single game session, the problem does not lie with the players – something is seriously wrong with the way the GM is gamemastering.

The Adventure

The *adventure* is the glue that holds the interest of the players from one session to another. Unless obstacles are linked together in a coherent way, the game will become meaningless and lack focus. The adventure often requires several game sessions, with some obstacles failed along the way before victory is achieved. When success finally comes it is richly savored.

An adventure is a bit like a two-hour movie or a single episode of a TV show like *Star Trek*, although roleplaying games are far more dynamic.

Moving through each adventure requires sustained effort, but it is a good idea for a GM to keep adventures short so the group doesn't get frustrated and feel bogged down. The first adventure should complete in the first session; the second and future adventures might take one to four sessions each to complete.

The Campaign

Finally, players need to feel that they're part of something larger than just themselves, that their actions in the game world are driving towards some ultimate end. We call that the *campaign*. The campaign gives the players a grounding in the universe and makes the game world feel far more realistic because players see their characters' actions having an impact on it over time.

The GM shouldn't even think about the campaign for at least the first few sessions.

Plan for One Session Only

As you craft interesting situations for the players to encounter, always think in terms of a single game session. Your goal is to prepare just a little more material than will be used by the team in a session.

Why focus on just one session? Three reasons come to mind.

First, we GMs are smart and creative. We always think of terrific ideas to improve the adventure *after* it has begun. So we should reserve our right to improve on the adventure after each session ends.

Second, the group will come up with neat ideas that will make the adventure a lot better. If the GM has already planned every detail in advance, he loses the chance for the players to participate in creating the adventure. A GM needs to be flexible; he needs to listen to the players.

Third, time is valuable. If GMs spend more time than needed to prepare for a session, they're wasting precious time.

In the beginning of a game, it'll be hardest to estimate just how much to create. However, as a GM gains experience with the group, it gets easier to estimate how much material to prepare. Create a little more than you

expect the team to get through, and don't be afraid to end the session early if you run out of material.

In the Beginning: "You find yourself in a tavern..."

How should a GM assemble the party together and get the adventure under way?

About the worst way is to dump them all in a tavern and suggest they introduce themselves. If the GM is lucky, the players will stammer out something like, "Uh, hi, I'm Dogfoot the Brave, warrior and blade master, servant of Chaos... uh... (shuffles paper) I'm uh... six feet tall and I have a black cape." At this point you might as well end the game since every player has mentally checked out. Using the tavern setup says to the players, "I'm too lazy to think of a good beginning for this adventure, and this is going to be a boring game."

A GM has to start the story strong and help it grow stronger. This is impossible without the proper foundations.

First, every character needs a legitimate reason for being wherever they are when the game starts. Come up with a reason and run it by the player. If they don't like the reasoning, let them come up with their own.

Next, the characters need a good reason to join forces. Many Gamemasters struggle with this. How does the GM get the characters to willingly form into a team? What event magically turns a bunch of strangers into a cohesive team? After looking over all the character information and GCs, simply choose the most likely starter from the *Adventure Start Table* on page 84.

As the saying goes, you can lead a horse to water but you cannot make it drink. Same with an adventure and players. A GM can only give them an opportunity and hope they go for it. Of course, how the GM presents the adventure will affect the likelihood of the party taking the adventure on.

Action Starts

A group of Action Players – players that prefer shooting first and asking questions later – should be encouraged during character creation to share a common patron – make them all members of an elite unit of a military, paramilitary, corporate, or criminal organization. Then you can hand out missions that get straight to the point and take the boredom out of the players roleplaying through finding all the information in the first stage of an adventure. This is also a great technique for a novice GM to use regardless of the players being from the Action or Acting camps.

Adventure Start Table	
By Direct Observation	
1	An atrocity (mugging, murder, theft or other injustice)
2	Low hanging fruit (an unlocked door; a fat, snobby, lightly-guarded merchant)
3	Overheard (boasting drunken revelers, eavesdropping, town crier)
4	Help Wanted sign
Survival	
5	Hijack, robbery
6	Natural disaster
7	Escape from imprisonment
8	Crash, shipwreck
From GCs	
9	The chance meeting
10	Tricked into showing up by foes
11	An urgent summons from a powerful figure
12	Shanghaied/press gang/drafted
13	Deputized into a posse or vigilante group
14	Professional assignment (military, corporate, feudal, etc.)
15	Referral, introduction from a friend
16	Summoned by magic
17	Framed and forced to find the real culprit
Through a Mistaken Identity	
18	You must be the new hired help
19	The job interview is over that way
20	That's them! They did it! Get them!!!

Start with a Bang

Once you have the basics of how the party might meet up, consider the way the first scene will start off. The first moments of the game will set the tone of the game forever, so lead with a sudden crisis. There's a reason

most action movies start off with a chase – it gets the audience involved. Similarly, try and craft a way to start everyone off in a state of conflict or danger. Introductions can come later when the heat of action dissipates. Work out how you're going to throw this group of total strangers into conflict right from the start. Then keep the pressure on.

My favorite approach is to put characters who are strangers in a survival situation that virtually forces them into a temporary alliance – perhaps their transport is hijacked, or they all witness something bizarre, maybe a crash, shipwreck, or natural disaster causes the characters to form into a team.

Creating the Seed of Adventure

During the character creation and interview, the players told you what they want to be doing in an adventure. There should be a lot to work from: a good-sized cast of main characters (PCs and GCs), goals that the team as well as each character desires to accomplish, skills that they have at their disposal, and a number of roleplaying situations. Now hook these elements up into an actual adventure.

Start by laying out all the Team Goal Cards, Character Goal Cards, Skill Cards, RP Cards and GC Cards you have as well as the cultures, laws and resources of all the relevant societies involved. Just put them down in any order, in fact mix them up a bit.

Spend a good amount of time reading over the goals and letting ideas percolate.

Give the highest focus to Team Goals since those are the easiest for everyone to adopt. It's a little harder to focus an adventure around one character's goal alone, and if you do this at the start you'll totally hook one player and leave the rest a little bored. If you can work in a Team Goal *and* a medium or long term character goal, that's a major success.

Don't try to jam in too many goals from different characters, or try to choose a goal for each character to start. The more goals you add, the harder it is to come up with a plausible adventure seed.

Besides, it's impossible to stuff every character goal in a single adventure, nor would anyone want to; after all, once a character completes all their goals, what reason does the player have to play? So choose one team goal and one or two character goals, and so much the better if two or more characters share goals.

Look through the friendly GC Cards already made. Imagine that you are each particular GC. Can you think of something that you, the GC, want that might allow these character goals to be accomplished?

If you can think of a remotely plausible excuse to use a Core GC, do it.

Even if you need to stretch it a bit, go for it. The party will be much more likely to trust a GC they know. Creating a new GC is a poor second choice.¹

Once you have the core goals and a way to introduce the adventure, one side of the equation is complete. But in order for there to be anything dramatic in the game, there has to be conflict. This means another GC.

Now consider the foe GCs the characters know. What are their goals? Are there any foe GCs whose goals are either the same or in opposition? When you put yourself in the shoes of the foe GC do you feel motivated to oppose the characters? If so, you have conflict. If the answer is no, go back and consider some other goals, or walk away and come back later.

The hint of an adventure should be creeping into your brain at this point. Verify that this hazy idea of an adventure can actually be completed by the skills existing on the team, and feels like something the players have told you they *want* to do. Keep noodling the idea around until you have an adventure concept that at a minimum meets one team goal, starts with a patron GC, includes one or more opposing GCs and is possible with the skills the team has. If character goals and RP Cards are involved, great.

This is an Adventure Seed – a short thumbnail of the objective and the patron GC involved. The Adventure Seed is never meant to be read aloud to the players – it’s a tool to help the GM create the adventure.

Here are three techniques to help create an Adventure Seed:

1. Add GCs for a GC
 - GCs friendly to the party probably have their own foes. Choose a party-friendly GC and develop a foe GC. A situation that requires the party’s assistance should be coming to mind.
2. Flesh out a Character Goal
 - Goals that individual characters want to achieve surely have GCs blocking their way. Choose a character goal and consider who and what might be blocking that goal. Use an existing GC if you can or create a GC and use this as the opposition to the adventure.
3. Use Classes and/or Resources
 - Choose a resource you believe the team would desire or desire to protect. Look at the societies involved. Which cultures are in conflict with the culture of the adventurers? Create a GC with the opposing culture who desires or controls that particular resource. Use or create friendly GCs who will enlist the aid of the party to protect or acquire the resource.

For the *Anneborn* campaign, I use the Team Goal “Acquire money” and match them with the patron GC of Shewel. I know the Marquis is a powerful man who controls a lot of land – what sorts of problems might he have? Well, bandits are an obvious problem, and a wealthy lord might well pay to rid his lands of bandits. There’s our Adventure Seed. It’s that easy.

¹ Two example Adventure Seeds begin on page 90.

To start the *Frontiers* campaign, a gripping, action-packed kickoff is called for. Since none of the characters know each other the only Team Goal is “Bring the team together.” I have to find a plausible way to unite the characters and get the action started. I know Ursa needs to pick up her starship and find crew. Rajah needs to get out of the current backwater system and back into action, and Arlon wants to travel and acquire some gear. I put them all on a small transport spaceboat being ferried from one planet to another in the system. It’s completely believable they’d all be aboard a ship in pursuit of their own personal goals. Bad things happen to ships all the time, but what specifically? To get some ideas I look for likely enemies. Arlon is on the blacklist of a notorious pirate band, so I’ll make those pirates hijack the boat with the dual goal of stealing the boat and bringing Arlon to justice. The resulting action should bring the group together in common defense. After the pirates are (hopefully) defeated, it’ll make perfect sense for the characters to team up and crew Ursa’s ship.

Don’t put too much time into the Adventure Seed. If a GM puts too much work in up front, he may not be open to taking advantage of player created story twists that could take the game into other, often more interesting, directions.

Training as an Adventure

There are many types of adventures but one is commonly overlooked: training. Most players are going to include self-improvement as a fundamental goal for their character. For many players, making their character more powerful is nearly their entire focus. However, the GM should not feel pressured to automatically hand out new levels of experience just because the game system says the character has accumulated enough experience.

Certainly much learning comes simply by doing. The successful GM will offer multiple opportunities for characters to improve their skills this way in each session.

Sometimes additional learning is also necessary, learning that can only be achieved by seeking out a mentor when the character is ready.

Take this real world example: as a pilot in the United States, one is not permitted to obtain an Instrument Rating (which allows the pilot to fly when they cannot see the ground because of clouds) until the pilot has flown at least 250 hours as a Private Pilot. This is because pilots need time to refine their basic flying skills before taking on the much more challenging task of flying completely on instruments. It’s unfortunately based on a lot of dead inexperienced pilots. A pilot wanting an Instrument Rating requires a lot of training, study, and a capable teacher, as well as plenty of money.

In a roleplaying game, a character may have accumulated a lot of expe-

rience in martial arts street fighting. However, they cannot improve until they find a master willing to teach them new techniques.

Finding the right mentor then becomes an adventure in itself. Once found, the character may find they must pay a substantial amount of money to advance (requiring an adventure to raise the funds) or perform a task (adventure) in return for the teaching.

The Nemesis

Now you have a seed, but you need to add fertilizer, something that will allow the seed to sprout. This is the Nemesis. It's an apt metaphor – fertilizer is foul, it surrounds the seed and allows it to grow.

Every adventure must have a strong antagonist as a GC. I call that GC a Nemesis. More than a simple villain, or big bad monster, the Nemesis is the cornerstone of conflict in a game. Sure, a GM can simply throw two-dimensional foes against the team all day long. But if a GM wants to put the players on the edge of their seats and really inject some interest, a solid Nemesis is required.

The Nemesis repeatedly thwarts the party from achieving their objectives through direct actions or the actions of his minions. Each minor victory or failure the team has against this enemy will only increase their desire to kill, imprison, or otherwise bring the Nemesis to justice.

The Nemesis also helps tie one game session to the next by providing a longer term goal.

The Nemesis is Not Easily Defeated

The party will *always* have to make a series of attempts to overcome the Nemesis and complete the adventure. Or the Nemesis can thwart the team's plans – which should lead to yet another adventure... No matter what kind of Nemesis the GM pits against the team, the Nemesis must constantly evade total defeat for a long, long time. The party might defeat many lesser foes and even win every battle against a Nemesis, but under no circumstances can the GM allow the Nemesis to be removed from play without a series of failed attempts by the team. It is this very difficulty of defeating a Nemesis that keeps the players involved. If a GM hands a Nemesis to the party on a plate, there is no challenge and the party will feel no great sense of victory. Strong feelings about a Nemesis *only* come after failure.

Constantly keep the Nemesis one step ahead of the party. It causes frustration, which usually leads to the group being more interested in overcoming the Nemesis. It may become their sole purpose for a time.

Continue to keep the Nemesis just a hair's breadth away from capture, death, or imprisonment until the moment is ripe to hand him over.²

Choose your Nemesis carefully. Naturally, use a Core GC if you can. Spend time fleshing out this character. You might put at least as much time into the game's Nemesis as a player does into his character.

More details will have to be added than will fit on a simple GC Card, of course: a short Rights and Wrongs, Friends and Foes, Goal Sheet and Quirks and Traits should be put together. Leave plenty of room for filling in details as the adventure progresses.

One last thing you might consider as you create the Nemesis is to create a secret ally of the team who is also the enemy of the Nemesis. This ally could swoop in and rescue the group if they get in over their heads.

Completing the metaphor, the seed and fertilizer come from the GM in the form of the Adventure Seed and Nemesis. Some seeds will wither and die, some will bloom into mighty trees. The interactions of the players and GM during the session provide the water and sunlight that cause the seed to bloom and grow. The players direct the growth of the adventure in the same way a gardener prunes limbs from a tree, deciding which direction the tree will grow and how tall it will reach.

The Payoff

Before you decide to retire a Nemesis make sure you've wrung as much adventure as possible out of him.³ Eventually though, after many sessions, close calls, near misses and other frustrations, it is time to let the team have their day.

Once you decide it's time for the final showdown, have an elaborate and thrilling chase or fight in mind and at least partially sketched out as a fitting end. In this the GM should never let the players down. They've been thwarted to no end throughout the game; now they deserve an apt and emotionally rewarding conclusion. Draw out the pursuit or battle as long as you can. Throw obstacle after obstacle in their paths, exhaust the party, and then finally, finally give them what they've been wanting. Allow them to say what they want to say to the Nemesis before the final absolute end. With players from the Acting camp this might mean an extended dialog, but even Action players will want to hurl one last quip or insult at their dreaded enemy.

Lastly give them a lengthy and satisfying description of the downfall of the Nemesis. At this point the players will be hanging on your every word.

The classic action movie climax, where everyone is out of ammo and a hand-to-hand battle ensues or the protagonist and antagonist drop their

² For more on prolonging the Nemesis in the campaign, see page 245.

³ The section on upgrading/removing a Nemesis in the Keeping Players Challenged chapter on page 282 covers this in more detail.

weapons and duke it out to determine a winner is a great technique. It may sound corny now but during the game it works.

Once again a GM should consider using the Nemesis in other ways before letting the team kill him off. Turning the Nemesis into a temporary patron or ally is a clever re-use *if* you can come up with a credible way to put the Nemesis temporarily on the side of the team. Then after some period of alliance, the time will come for the Nemesis to betray the team. A new cycle begins.

Try to work in a new Nemesis well before the current adventure closes off so there isn't a lapse in conflict. This is a great way to change the pace and focus of the campaign entirely and take the team in a refreshing new direction.

However, don't close off a particular storyline entirely if you feel it is working well. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. Continue to work within an existing story by inserting a new Nemesis. Good sources for a new Nemesis can be found among the bosses or superiors of the current Nemesis, replacements, enemies who step into the power vacuum created by the departure or waning power of the original, siblings, parents, and other close relatives and allies.

Adventure Seed and Nemesis for the *Anneborn* Campaign

A GC will often be the team's first connection to a new adventure. In *Anneborn* I wrote the kickoff more or less from the patron's point of view since this is the only information the players will likely start with. Since this campaign has been going on for some time and the players are heavily involved with their characters I don't have to worry about bringing the team together or kicking off with a huge bang.

Title: Bawldok's Bane

Adventure Seed: The Marquis of Yarlen, Shewel's wealthy patron, offers to hire the party to rid the area of a marauding gang of bandits. The bandits aren't particularly well armed or organized, but they have been terrorizing the Marquis' outlying lands, preying on traveling merchants, demanding food and other favors from village-folk. Lately they have become so bold that they kidnap the wealthier citizens of Yarlen and hold them for ransom. The Marquis has had enough and asks the party to locate and bring the bandit leader to the Marquis, dead or alive.

Nemesis: Bawldok the bandit leader.

Adventure Seed and Nemesis for *Frontiers* Campaign Start

In the *Frontiers* campaign, *circumstances* introduce the adventure seed. Since this is the first game session with all new characters, more information is necessary. Each character needs a reason to be *here*, and the game needs to start with action.

Title: Maiden Voyage

Adventure Seed: Ursa qualified for a starship loan under the Alliance-sponsored Derelict Refurbishment and Trade Encouragement Act which grants her ownership of a previously mothballed 129 year old 200-ton Free Trader, subject to a thirty year mortgage. She is traveling to claim the vessel, outfit it, find a crew, and begin the trading program.

Rajah is trying to find a way out of the system. A gambler, she heard that some action is to be had fleecing new captains flush with cash from their seed capital. Failing that, she hopes to sign on with a trader and get back to the Chrysalis system where she has more connections and better prospects for work.

Arlon needs some gear and the most likely way to earn money would be as a security chief on a starship.

Their transport boat is hijacked by pirates who wish to bring Arlon to justice as well as capture a prize.

Nemesis: Andres Pellonique, captain of *Le Chat Retors*.

Chapter 7

The Obstacle and Its Three Stages

Once you have the Adventure Seed and Nemesis, begin setting out the short term obstacles that might be needed to complete the session. I say *might be needed* because, (a) every obstacle won't necessarily be used in a session and, (b) the party is almost certain to spontaneously devise its own obstacles during the game.

Obstacles are the heart of the game, the fundamental structure that keeps the GM sane and the players motivated. An obstacle is *one* clearly spelled out challenge. An obstacle must be simple – a locked door that needs to be picked, a foe that needs to be overcome, a message that needs delivering. If you can't explain the obstacle in such simple terms, then you probably don't have a single obstacle.

During a session, things won't be so simple. Gamemasters should not be disconcerted if the players digress down deep rabbit holes pursuing strange things that seem to have nothing to do with the obstacle or even the adventure seed. The players may dawdle and argue over which course to take, they may even abandon the adventure altogether. As savvy GMs we will expect any or all of these things to happen, and will have alternative activities ready that will reinvigorate the game.

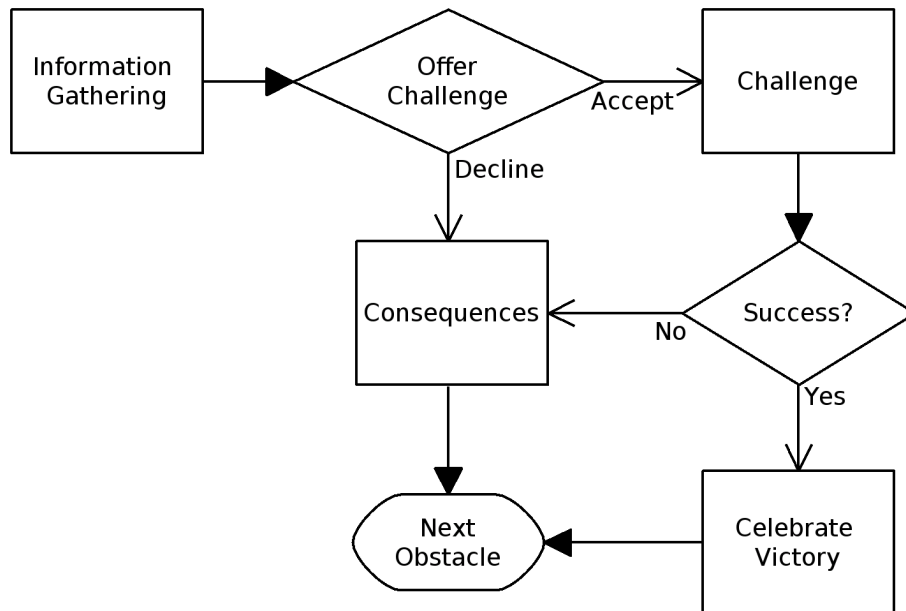
Only one thing is certain. If the players actually decide they want to play out the adventure, they'll have to do it one step at a time. This calls for working their way through, under, over, or around each obstacle as they encounter it.

To conquer any obstacle, three stages are always involved: Information Gathering, The Challenge, and Celebrating Victory. These stages provide a sort of atomic structure for roleplaying games. Academics engaged in studies of roleplaying may argue over the number of stages but I'm not concerned about the academic viewpoint; I care about running great games. Breaking down an obstacle into more than three stages doesn't help you be a better GM. This obstacle cycle is the core of the RPG – discover, overcome, celebrate, repeat.

Obstacles can either be linear and dependent, or disconnected and pursuable in parallel. In other words, some obstacles can be accomplished by themselves while a different sort may require getting through other obstacles first. A good adventure has a mix of both kinds.

The three stages might not chain together smoothly during the adventure. The group will create their own red herrings, blunder into their own

Figure 7.1. The Obstacle Cycle



difficulties, and possibly pursue entirely different adventures for a while. That's to be expected.

The flowchart in Figure 7.1 shows how the team travels through a typical obstacle.

Obstacle Success is Never Assured

A GM has to *allow* the team to fail or the game will be dull. If the team always succeeds, the players will get bored. Failing all the time is incredibly frustrating for players. The most fun lies in creating an atmosphere where things can and do go horribly, horribly wrong for the team and yet somehow at the end they emerge triumphant.

To complicate matters gamemasters don't know what the players will do when confronted with an obstacle. We think they will try to overcome it but they might ignore it, shortcut it, fail it, even join forces with it. And these choices *must* lie with the players. It's our challenge to deal with the result.

Expert Gamemasters simply present obstacles that are a mix of easy, sufficiently challenging and occasionally impossible. The impossible sometimes unexpectedly becomes possible, but we'll get to that. They are never surprised by the success or failure of any obstacle – or, if they are they don't let it show. No matter the outcome, the game goes on.

Stage One: Information Gathering

Before the players can decide to pursue an obstacle they have to be aware of it. In a simple obstacle, stopping a mugging for example, all the relevant information might be available right in front of the team. In more complex obstacles, players may need to assemble different (and often conflicting) data from a variety of sources.

The trick is making sure the players have the tools at hand to collect the information. A GM cannot simply set up an obstacle and hope the players will figure it out. Many a well-planned game has been stalled for painful hours because the Gamemaster didn't think through the Information Gathering stage.

Know What Information to Give

Novice Gamemasters assume the information gathering stage is a guessing game, where players poke around trying to figure out what the adventure is about. When the players come up with the magic combination that only the GM knows they will be rewarded. Not so.

A GM has to take active steps to make sure the party can uncover critical information. An essential part of that is planning in advance how players will learn about the obstacles they choose to face.

By *critical information* I mean anything the team needs before they can move forward to the next stage. This is not to say the GM should give out *all* information, or give out information *easily*.¹

The most reliable way to impart information is to use one or more of the GCs the team has an existing relationship with, since the team will tend to trust these people. However, Gamemasters need to vary the ways they deliver information. If the only way the characters find out about things is to ask trusted GCs, adventures become predictable and dull.

The *Information Gathering Table* lists fourteen ways to get vital information to the group. There may be many others.

Consider what kind of information the players will need, and attach at least two logical ways to uncover the required information. This gives you a backup in case the original setup doesn't play out as you expect it to.

Say the party is seeking a missing or captured person. You might set up an encounter with one or more GCs who can point the way to the missing person. The GC may be an eyewitness, a guard, a local, or a relative. If that fails, say the team insults or ignores the GC, you need a backup. You might choose to have them overhear some loud GCs excitedly discussing how they're looking for the missing person too, and they just found out he's hiding at so-and-so's house. Now it's a race to see who gets there first, or perhaps the adventurers decide to join forces with the GCs.

¹ See *Creating Suspense* on page 193 for more.

Later we'll cover techniques for dealing with those times when both information gathering setups are missed by the players.

Information Gathering Table		
	Method	Examples
1	Media	Town criers, newspapers, holo programs
2	Searching	Snooping, eavesdropping, spotting locked or hidden things
3	Archival data	Libraries, ancient tomes, databases
4	Friends	Mentors, patrons, allies, innkeepers
5	Accidentally	From foes, rivals, PoAs, Nemeses, thugs, friendly GCs, stupid henchmen, accidentally overheard
6	Leaked	By foes, PoAs, Nemeses, thugs
7	Illegally	Bribery, extortion, blackmail
8	Extracted	Interrogation, trickery, social engineering, charm, drugs
9	Flashback	This should be acted out or described by the Gamemaster as if it were happening
10	Known	Pass the information to a player privately and let them reveal the information (a GM must never speak for a player!)
11	Gossip	Through the grapevine, rumors
12	By chance	Examples: a GC drops a piece of paper with the evening's Castle guard challenge/response passcode or perhaps the party accidentally bumps into a fugitive who has the right information
13	Magically	Through an object or spell (such as Geas, Charm, crystal balls, Artifacts, magical mirrors, and the like)
14	Intuited	Imparted through a dream/hunch, passed on by touching an item or person, discovered by visiting a psychic or shaman, inhaling/ingesting/injecting a substance, or as part of a psionic skill

Looking at this table you may be thinking, "At last, a reason to use that 14 sided die!" Seriously, put the dice down and don't leave this to chance.

Stage Two: The Challenge

The challenge is the meat of the obstacle. This is the point of action that leads to defeat or victory. The team has gathered the information they need and taken on the obstacle. Now they have to figure out how to overcome the challenge before they can advance to the final stage.

Use Existing GCs

Not every challenge will have a GC attached, but when it makes sense, try to match up challenges with existing foes – either the Nemesis or others. It strengthens the game when the team constantly does battle with an existing enemy, and it eases the GM's pre-game prep time.

Of course you should also try to match up challenges to existing friendly GCs. The friend is likely to request “just a little something” in return for helping out. Interestingly, these side adventures have often become the main story in my games!

Match Skills

More than just making challenges doable, focus on matching up appropriate challenges with Character Goals as well as their capabilities. The Skill Use and Goal Cards are what to rely on here. Pull those out and use them to create challenges that match up to the characters' skills and goals.

Everyone Must Have Something To Do

When preparing challenges for a game session, rotate from one character to another, creating a challenge for one character and then the next and so on, then starting again. This way you are sure to have an even mix of challenges for everyone. Otherwise a GM risks boring a player while others eat up all the glory.

Multiple Character Challenges

The most entertaining challenges require the coordinated efforts of multiple characters or the entire team. The more the team works together facing and prevailing over challenges, the more fun the game will be for everyone. Besides, the GM needs to create multiple challenges for each character during each session anyway, so why not save time and load up obstacles with a challenge that can only be solved through cooperation?

For example, a large monster that takes the combined combat skill of a team to defeat, or a ship that requires a pilot, gunner, and engineer to win a battle. Much more creative and complex challenges can be cooked up with just a little imagination.

Pace the Difficulty

Try to present the start of an adventure as being filled with fairly easy challenges. Hide the difficult challenges from the party until they've committed. If a group thinks it might be too hard or risky they'll be less likely to commit. You might make one or two challenges known to the team at most – and take pains to hide the others. The short term challenges that are the most fun will appear to the party to have relatively obvious solutions, but as the story unfolds they turn out to have hidden complexities.

Have at Least Two Ways Out

Always think of at least two ways for the party to triumph over the challenge with their existing skills and equipment. I've made the mistake of forgetting this and realized in horror during the game that the party was actually incapable of overcoming a challenge, or they couldn't figure out the sole solution.

Types of Challenges

Use the *Table of Challenges* to help mix up the types of challenges and add depth and richness to ordinary obstacles.

The *Table of Challenges* isn't meant to be an exhaustive list, just a starting point. The table lists generic challenge types and just a few of the many variations possible. For example, variations on the *Legal, Drafted* type that I didn't include on the table: being shanghaied, pressed into service by a press gang, and deputized into a posse. *Environmental, Map Needed* type variations include: minefields, asteroid fields, underwater reefs, and large buildings. *Environmental, Unusual Danger* type variations are even wider and include: vacuum, zero gravity, a hurricane, poison gas - deliberate or accidental, volcanic eruption/lava flow, underwater location, and severe cold or heat. You could probably fill another book with all the possibilities.

The table also lists some possible ways a team might try to overcome each type. Consider the party's capabilities and desires and match up at least two ways to overcome the challenge.

Table of Challenges		
PC/GC		
1	Hostile forces	Sneak, overwhelm, distract, charm, socially engineer, bribe
2	Ethical dilemma	Changes in belief, regrettable actions
3	Social manipulation	Extortion, peer pressure, honor
4	Social norms	Follow or face the consequences
5	Opposed friend	Persuade, charm, socially engineer, lie, turn a friend into a foe
6	On the fence	Trickery, bribery, threats, extortion
7	Friendly mole	Hefty payment, do a favor, blackmail
INFORMATIONAL		
8	Secret door/trap	Pick or disable, break, go around
9	Pass code	Eavesdrop, spy, bribe, extort, charm, socially engineer
10	Lock	Pick, copy/steal key, break, go around
11	Language	Hire translator, learn, guess, ignore
12	Encryption	Decrypt (brute force, mechanically), socially engineer, steal
13	Riddles	Guess, socially engineer
14	Red herring	Uncover the truth (eventually), ignore
MAGICAL or SUPERNATURAL		
15	Spellbound	Perform quest, overcome, eliminate
16	Entity knowledge	Appease supernatural entity, trick, perform task, speak the magic word
17	Cursed	Live with it, have curse lifted by other, perform task to lift the curse
18	Magical barrier	Remove magic, intentionally or unintentionally trigger effect, unlock/disarm
GEAR		
19	Stolen	Recover, replace, ignore
20	Destroyed	Substitute, replace, ignore
21	Malfunction	Fix, replace, ignore

LEGAL		
22	Caught	Trial/penalty, bribery, escape, rescue
23	Falsely imprisoned	Trial/penalty, bribery, escape, rescue
24	Detained	Give up valuable information, wait it out, make a friend, bribe
25	Abuse of power	Threaten to whistle blow, bribery, make a friend, do a favor
26	Permission	Get paperwork, forge paperwork, find another way
27	Drafted	Fulfill duty, go AWOL, spy
ENVIRONMENTAL		
28	Distance	Walk, fly, ride, hike, buy/rent transport, stowaway, hijack
29	Wilderness	Endure, cross, avoid
30	Physical barrier	Climb, tunnel, avoid, destroy
31	Unknown map	Magic, research, socially engineer
32	Map needed	Obtain map, make a search, remove or go around, wait it out, take a chance
33	Unusual danger	Magic, special equipment, knowledge, avoid
FINANCIAL		
34	Medical cost	Pay it, do a favor, trade, make a friend, bribe
35	Equipment cost	Beg/borrow/steal, travel to find, raise funds
36	Loan payment	Pay/barter, do favor, befriend, bribe
37	Tuition	Pay/barter, do favor, trade, befriend, bribe
38	Familial obligation	Do it, hire a proxy, ignore it and pay the price later, make excuse
OTHER		
39	Unpleasant task	Do it, hire proxy to perform, ignore, find ways to avoid

Stage Three: Celebrate Victory

The team has finally overcome the challenge presented to them. Now what? Inexperienced Gamemasters just move into another obstacle without giving the team credit for their accomplishment. The novice Gamemaster thinks that the doing of the thing, or the experience points, or the treasure is enough. It's not enough.

Every victory must be celebrated! This doesn't mean that after every triumph the team should bust out and have a party. The celebration can be as simple as a good description of the success from the GM.

Whenever a challenge is overcome, at the minimum take time and effort to describe the victory. A good description of victory makes everyone feel great and will really encourage players to accomplish more.

Use GCs to point out how amazing a particular victory has been. This can be as simple as describing how several onlookers' jaws dropped and an "Oooh" of astonishment went up from the crowd. Or the GM can describe elaborate festivals with medals of honor, keys to the city, or the giving of knighthood or noble rank. Although these rewards have no monetary value they can be among the most treasured moments of play for the players.

For challenges with no GC witnesses, such as picking a lock, the description has to give the character's efforts justice. Don't just say, "You picked the lock," whoop-de-doo. The person playing the lock picker has been looking forward to using those picks, so give the victory its due: "Pleek the Rogue crouches in front of the imposing steel door and works at the massive lock for several minutes. Finally, a clear and satisfying click is heard as Pleek turns his tools and unlocks the door." A solid description like this gives the player an important moment to be recognized by the group. It's a chance for the players to congratulate, gloat, and grow tighter as a group.

For every obstacle think about how you're going to help the team celebrate in advance. Note down some possible ideas for describing the win, but you would never just read something written back to the players – reading prepared text aloud is one of the top ten mistakes of gamemastering. This and the other nine are listed at the end of the book. A great GM leaves himself plenty of room to embellish or add detail on the spot.

Common Knowledge

In each obstacle there may be knowledge commonly known by locals or even the party that will help the team win. Record that information for use during the game.

At this point write at most a paragraph or two of common knowledge that you might have to pass on to the team during the adventure.

Some examples of common knowledge would be general geographic features (“there is a desert to the south”), approximate locations of major landmarks and settlements (“Yarlen is a few days ride from here”), major political events (“there is a war going on”), reasonably obvious details about society or things the party would just know by being there.

Dependent Obstacles

Many novice GMs and as many commercial adventures lay out sprawling adventures with too many major dependent obstacles. That is, main obstacles that can’t be overcome until another is completed. Some adventures have a nearly linear set of obstacles that allow few or no decision points for the team.

Certainly, some obstacles must be dependent on others. In some cases this is necessary, as in the game kickoff to the *Frontiers* campaign on page 157. In that adventure, each obstacle has multiple ways to succeed, and failure carries real consequences.

Try to keep dependent obstacles minor. For example, one obstacle might be finding a hidden map to an abandoned hideout. Another minor obstacle might be the discovery of clues in the hideout. A third obstacle would be piecing together the clues to find out where the princess is being held. The second obstacle is dependent upon the completion of the first, but the third should not be dependent on overcoming the second or the first.

Why? If the team never discovers the map the adventure goes cold. Other clues should be available via different means to ensure the team can find the ransomed princess.

The important thing is that you take the time in advance to consider how to move the story along to any of a number of ready obstacles as soon as one obstacle is either completed or the attempt to do so has failed. During the adventure creation stage, you must frequently ask yourself, “What happens if the team fails this obstacle?”

Failing Obstacles

The team can’t and shouldn’t overcome every obstacle presented them. Sometimes they make wrong decisions, sometimes the dice don’t roll their way. It happens.

For this reason a GM should avoid obstacles that absolutely *must* be overcome or the adventure stops cold. Say the GM has created an obstacle that requires the party to be on a particular ship or the kidnapped princess is lost forever. For whatever reason, the group misses the ship. Now, because the GM didn’t consider the possibility that the team could fail to meet and defeat this obstacle, the whole adventure is over. Bad prep on the Gamemaster’s part.

If there is a chance the obstacle can be failed catastrophically, with no chance to try again or to find an alternate solution, the Gamemaster should reconsider the obstacle. At a minimum have a backup or alternate obstacle if failure does happen.

Now consider the opposite situation.

Deliberately Setting Up the Team to Fail

Creating an obstacle designed for failure is dangerous business. While you should never set up a situation where the team is destined to fail no matter what, stacking the deck against them from time to time is part of the GM's job. Alarms and Holding Devices are two cases where failure might be expected to add interest to the story.²

When setting up a team for failure, always consider the impossible: somehow, against all odds, the players overcome their opposition. It can happen, and if enough games are played, it will happen.

On page 151 you'll find the *Bandit Lair* session sheet for the *Anneborn* campaign. If the bandits are alerted to the presence of the party early on, the game becomes richer and more challenging. So I've set out two Alarm obstacles that I hope they'll fail – *Surprise the Surprisers* and *Delmore the Bandit Scout*. If they manage to overcome both of those obstacles and sneak up on the bandits, I can still make the game more challenging by having the surprised Bawldok order his young bandits to attack the team while he makes an escape.

Obstacles Per Session

So how many obstacles should a GM prepare for each session? The answer depends on two factors – the group and the obstacles the GM creates.

A group heavy on Acting players might take ten times as long as an Action oriented group to overcome an obstacle and vice versa.

Some obstacles might be rather simple and take only a couple of minutes to defeat – getting through or around a locked door, for example. Others might take over an hour to complete – say performing an important negotiation in exchange for information, or a particularly hairy combat scene.

The more the GM games with a group, the easier it will be to predict how long certain obstacles will take. As GMs gain experience, they're also able to throw in simple obstacles on the fly. At some point the GM doesn't have to prepare for simple obstacles, they just come to him in the moment.

If you run out of prepared obstacles, you could just end the game early, but this is disappointing to everyone. For a game's first run it's better to

² See page 119.

be over-prepared. Start with four obstacles for every hour of gameplay in a session. Worst case, you have reduced your prep for the next session to five minutes.

The adventure seed counts as an obstacle. Each GC that needs to be interacted with counts as an obstacle, but only if the GM has players in the Acting camp – Action camp types will blow through GC interactions in no time. A GM can probably count combat-oriented obstacles as double for Action camp players.

Instant Obstacles

It's a good idea to come up with two or three obstacles you can spring upon the party to liven up the game. Easily defeated foes are best for instant obstacles because combat always livens up a game, and there should always be several foes out to get the team.

It's quite reasonable to interrupt the story in progress for, say, a duel with the avenging student of a previously defeated Nemesis. Or you might drop one or two bumbling guards on the group.

Be prepared to kickstart the action by creating some throwaway GCs. My favorite and most believable source for throwaway GCs are random encounters with feuders or vengeance-seekers. Work with what you have and tie in throwaways to past actions by the team.

Emergency Backup Adventure

A more advanced instant obstacle is the emergency backup adventure (EBA). The EBA is used to delay unexpected player action until you've had time to plan.³ The EBA eats up the rest of the session in a dramatic, extended, unexpected chase and/or fight scene.

EBAs use character foes or a Nemesis not part of the current adventure. They come out of nowhere and suddenly sweep the story into a completely different arc. The EBA for *Bandit Lair* would involve extending the *Brawl at the Black Briar* instant obstacle.⁴

All you need for an EBA is a foe or Nemesis and three or four obstacles. If the EBA doesn't get used, just keep it in reserve until it becomes necessary.

Layering

The best games have layered adventures. That is, there are multiple adventures occurring at the same time. Gamemasters should create layered game sessions for lots of reasons. When the team hits a roadblock on one adventure, the well prepared Gamemaster will segue into another without

³ See page 259.

⁴ See page 157.

skipping a beat. Layered stories allow complex and unexpected interactions to occur. Layered games are more realistic, less obvious, leave more room for the GM to improvise and surprise and more choice for the players.

Another reason to layer is to keep up the tension and conflict. As the players are celebrating their victory over one adventure they should also be looking over their shoulders because another adventure's dangers are already pressing upon them.

Moving freely between different adventures increases the players' free will, which is always a good thing. They see that they are choosing their characters' paths and are not being forced down a predetermined track. It also keeps them guessing about what may be heading their way.

Chapter 8

Adventure Settings

There are three types of settings for adventures – a settlement, the frontier, and the wilderness. A *settlement* is any established area where a group of social, civilized beings have permanent dwellings and a system of law. A *frontier* is any area where sentient beings live and interact without a formalized system of law. Everything else is *wilderness*.

Settlements

Settlements range from hamlets consisting of just a handful of people to a sprawling megapolis that covers an entire planet. Though their size varies wildly, settlements are always rife with opportunities for adventure.

The idea that an adventure lurks around every corner is a good concept to keep in mind when the team is running around in a settlement. So while it is fairly obvious that hanging out in a tavern might lead to a job with a traveling merchant, that banks provide opportunities to protect or burgle, and military installations offer the chance to spy or enlist, what kind of adventures might be found at, say, a laundry service?

Some of the better commercial RPG supplements are terrific resources for brainstorming what kinds of adventures might lie in wait for the party in more mundane locations. Using such a supplement to get ideas makes sense, but again I caution against simply adopting the supplement as is. Adventures need to be tooled for the team or the gamemaster risks players getting bored. At the very least pre-packaged GCs should be made relevant to the team by creating relationships with existing GCs.

The *Settlement Encounter Table* lists a good number of things that may befall adventurers in a settlement. The *Resident Woes Table* is a list of problems that might plague a settlement dweller. Encounters can act as stage one of a planned obstacle or be used on the fly to spice up a flagging session. Encounters tend to work best for action players. The *Woes* table is geared more for acting players since adventures generally result from GC interaction instead of witnessing or being victim to an event.

In the following two tables “witness to” means the team sees this happening to another GC and has the option of taking some kind of action, including observing or leaving.

Settlement Encounter Table	
Encounter	Starter Ideas
1 Con artist	Card game, chance to double your money but pay up front, witness to
2 Merchant	Selling desired goods/services, offering intel, hiring guards, robbed
3 Patrol	Seeking bribes, falsely accused, hassled, forming posse, offering reward
4 Burglar	Witness to, witness to pursuit, suspicious person casing location, victim of act
5 Pickpocket	Witness to, witness to pursuit, victim of act
6 Fire/flood	Witness to arson/sabotage, asked to help/rescue
7 Press gang	Forced to enlist, drugged and enlisted, offered job on gang, witness to
8 Beggar	Aggressive, offers rumors/help
9 Shakedown	Witness to interrogation, victim of
10 Bust	Victim of, witness to, enlisted in, offered job as spotter
11 Black market	Stumble upon, in need of
12 Extortion	Victim of, witness to, enlisted in resolving
13 Bribery	Witness to, enlisted in resolving or delivering
14 Hit	Witness to, victim of attempt, enlisted to perform or prevent
15 Courier	Deliver contraband, vital message, intercept same
16 Rescue	Hostage, prisoner, slave, trapped/lost
17 Noble/elder/leader	Job offer, witness event, opportunity to interact with
18 Protest/riot	Agent provocateur, mistaken arrest, distraction during heist
19 Coup	Whose side to take?
20 Siege	Defend, attack, infiltrate, spy

Resident Woes Table	
Encounter	Starter Ideas
1 Evil landlord or money lender	Usury, eviction, hazardous conditions, abuse
2 Evil boss	Abuse, stealing, withholding wages, punishment
3 Evil government	Taxation, eminent domain, corruption, unjust laws, environmental destruction, inflation, oppression
4 Evil business	Poor wages, dangerous conditions, environmental destruction, oppression
5 Evil cult	Unfair tithing, brainwashed child, illegal acts, abuse, oppression
6 Evil gang	Extortion, kidnapping, sabotage, vandalism, gang war, thieves
7 Employees	Stealing money, ideas, sabotage
8 Natural disaster	Famine, disease, rioting, looting, invasion, slavery, press gangs
9 Evil suitor	Swindling family, pressing into foul service or addiction
10 Rival	Business, gang, cult, socioeconomic group, culture, family
11 Sickness	Need money or specialist for healing, cause of criminal behavior
12 Drug addiction	Need money or specialist for healing, cause of criminal behavior
13 Evil Civil Servant	Abuse of power, extortion, corruption, unjust enforcement
14 Death threats	Against competitor, outsider, unbeliever, agitator, activist, whistleblower

While I am an advocate of minimalist preparation, especially when it comes to maps, it *does* make sense to consider in advance the obstacles in a given session and do a couple minutes of prep on the kinds of buildings the team is almost guaranteed to encounter.

Check out the *Maps* section on page 132 and *Working Without a Map* on page 263 before you start creating maps.

Settlement Layout

Each settlement larger than a village will have its own unique layout as well as unusual features not found in any other settlement. However, larger settlements share certain features, with the rare exception proving

the rule. Knowing this greatly helps a GM describe and manage the feel of a settlement without fiddling with exhaustive maps.¹

Warehouses

All settlements engage in trade with other settlements. How the goods are delivered will differ, but the areas where the goods are stored are generally well secured. There are two types of storage – either in the same building as the merchant or in a dedicated warehouse in an area where nobody wants to live (cheap rent).

Markets: Souks and Malls

People prefer to shop locally, so small markets will cluster near residential areas with one or two major market areas where most commerce is transacted. They may be open air or enclosed but are typically chaotic, bustling, crowded affairs often with semi-permanent stalls or carts. Haggling for prices may or may not be customary. Markets are safe but outsiders are easy to spot and merchants will often raise their prices or manipulate exchange rates in their favor.

Residential Areas

Each class will have its own living area. Movement between each area may be restricted or simply frowned upon. Areas where the lowest classes live may be ruled by local criminal bosses or gangs and quite dangerous to traverse, especially for outsiders.

Entertainment, Tourist Traps, Nightlife

Each class will typically frequent their own entertainment and/or dining areas.

Ship crew or caravan drivers don't want to go far to enjoy the nightlife a settlement has to offer, and specialized merchants will cater specifically to the needs of travelers looking for entertainment after an arduous trip within easy distance of ports or caravan stops. The high prices and rowdiness in these establishments generally makes them unpalatable for locals. The greater the trade, the larger the variety of options will exist for parting visiting crew with their paychecks.

There may be entertainment and/or food specifically for visitors – these “tourist traps” are clustered around interesting local cultural features. They are the most expensive to visit, and are crawling with locals looking to make a living off of visitors – legally or illegally.

Dangerous and Criminal Areas, Black Markets

Each town will have a black market for goods that are taboo and/or illegal. The outlying, safer areas of the black market will be for the least

¹ The *Building Types Table* on page 264 will also help.

illegal, while the deeper areas of the black market have the most variety of items available as well as the greatest danger to the unwary.

Frontier

The frontier is a place of mystery, opportunity, adventure, danger and rapid change. It draws the best of society—from hardy adventurers and savvy merchants to risk-taking speculators and inventors. The frontier also attracts the desperate, oppressed, poor and least privileged of society who come to make a place for themselves where none else exists. The freedom draws the outsiders, hermits and cast-offs of society. Lastly, the lack of formal law lures the worst sorts of psychopaths, criminals and con men.

Frontiers are recently discovered places where growth has outstripped any government's ability to establish law and order. In some cases the government may not even recognize the existence of the frontier. The pace of change on the frontier is blistering. Fortunes are made and lost in the blink of an eye, life is cheap, and every moment might be one's last.

Still, there tends to be greater group cohesion on the frontier. With no laws and no public infrastructure groups have to stick together to survive. A group in this case may be cultural, guilds, based on personal ties, etc.

Using the system described in Chapter 3 and summarized on page 30, the frontier looks like this:

Social Classes: Haves and have-nots, outcasts, criminals

Social Movement: Combination - Any except Gender

Political Rule: Anarchy

Taboo: Imposing law

Resources: Profitable trade with lawful settlements

Law: Everyone is judge, jury and executioner, tending towards an eye for an eye

Architecture: Ramshackle, cheap, and rapidly changing

In short, the frontier is the richest location for an RPG imaginable, with the largest risks and greatest rewards.

The Border Zone

A frontier area that deserves special attention is a border zone. Borders are interesting places, rife with adventuring opportunities. They are where differing cultures meet and often clash. Different cultures mean different standards, laws, mores, and taxes. These differences are often exploited by clever or reckless merchants who reap vast profits black-marketeering.

Every game universe will have border zones. Even in ancient times there were border outposts. Two special types of people inhabit border zones. Border officials and smugglers.

Border Officials

Since borders are generally far from their governing center, border officials are often given a great amount of personal judgment in the execution of their duties. Since oversight tends to be lax, border officials commonly go beyond their authorized power to extort bribes or reward favorites. These tendencies make a high-ranking border official a good Nemesis or Patron.

Take a simple-seeming scenario. Travelers need a visa or other form of official authorization to pass. If the team does not already have authorization, the border official is now in a position of great power over the party. If the official in charge of the border outpost is corrupt, he may require anything from a token payment, a rather onerous tithe, or perhaps some sort of favor. If the party must cross and fails to get the proper documents, things can suddenly get interesting. Will the party attempt to stow away? Waylay other travelers for their documents? Obtain or create forged papers? Perhaps they'll have to detour around a large mountain pass, throwing them into danger. A common event has now become an entire side-adventure.

Gamemasters should also take local customs into consideration. Just because a border official demands extra payment or favors doesn't necessarily make them corrupt in their culture. What we consider illegal bribery might be expected in the legal system of the new culture the team has just reached. This isn't hard to believe – even today there are many countries where such a payment would be considered customary even though illegal, strictly speaking. In some third world countries, officials simply cannot survive on the meager pay doled out by their governments. Everyone knows these officials have to supplement their income. To the seasoned merchant traveler, this becomes part of the cost of doing business.

Border officials are usually also tasked with enforcing laws pertaining to smuggling. They may be required to collect taxes or make sure certain items have been taxed before allowing them across the border. This of course is known as Customs.

Local laws can be employed to depower the team if necessary. Nothing increases the feeling of vulnerability more than being deprived of weapons. See *Outlawing Items* on page 283 for more.

Smugglers

Smugglers appear when an imbalance exists between the two bordering areas – where something is less illegal or less heavily taxed on one side of the border, but not on the other side. It could be almost any thing people need or desire – weapons, technology, drugs, entertainment, food/water, or other luxuries.

Where a demand exists, there will always be people who will seek to fill that demand—at a profit. The more draconian the enforcement, the higher the risk and therefore profit to smugglers.

The *Traveller* system is the only RPG I'm aware of that explicitly defines what is and what is not legal in a particular government using a simple twelve-point scale. It's worth looking at this system to get ideas even if a GM isn't running a sci-fi game.

PCs can intersect with smugglers in many ways. They may be smugglers themselves and encounter tough competition, be mistaken for smugglers, provide protection for smugglers, be duped into carrying contraband for smugglers, or simply encounter smugglers in the act. They may be looking for smugglers, either as law enforcement, vigilantes, or as thieves.

Smuggling operations vary from part time, unorganized, poorly run misadventures to extremely complex operations that involve corrupted government officials. However, individual smugglers are people too, and their motivations are often complex. Gamemasters may want to make smugglers the gritty, backstabbing stereotypes found in movies and television. Or they may prefer to add depth by creating reasons for smuggling that don't revolve around greed. For example, a father is trying to obtain medicine for a sick child, or freedom fighters are using smuggling to finance their struggle against oppression. A smuggler might just believe in the cause, or they might be being blackmailed.

At least three situations will trigger smuggling operations – laws, taxes and monopolies.

Laws - Laws are a common way that governments create smugglers, inadvertently or through corruption. Just about anything is liable to be smuggled in the right situation – drugs, clothing, weapons, people, technology, information, entertainment products, even food, water and air.

Look at the resources and taboos for societies sharing a common border. If there aren't already smuggling opportunities, consider creating a taboo or law against a particular resource on one side of the border, and not on the other side. Instant smugglers.

Taxes - Excessive taxes on legal goods will also create smuggling opportunities as merchants seek to improve their profits and bypass import duties. This is generally a less risky and more peaceful type of smuggling operation. Smugglers looking to get around unreasonable taxes may be regarded more sympathetically by the heroes than, say, drug smugglers. A team needing fast cash might be persuaded to smuggle legal goods on the basis of it being perceived as a victimless crime.

Counterfeiting operations might also be happening when a highly popular resource can be easily duplicated either at a lesser quality (sometimes dangerously so) or simply without proper authority.

Monopolies - A monopoly exists when one group completely controls something that people want. Monopolists make for an excellent long-term Nemesis on the basis of their access to resources and political power, and the poor reputation monopolists tend to have. Monopolies can exist with

things as simple as a basic foodstuff or as complex as computer operating systems. A monopolist isn't always a powerful merchant – in some cases the government acts as a monopoly.

Monopolies create smugglers in the same way that laws and taxes do, because inevitably a monopoly either raises their prices to an unreasonable degree or ceases to innovate. People then actively begin to seek alternatives, and smugglers appear as the monopoly aggressively tries to protect its stranglehold on trade. At this point monopolists are also often targeted by counterfeiting operations.

War and Occupied Territories

Where societies differ or competition for resources exists, war often breaks out. If the team finds it necessary to pass across the border of two warring nations, they are likely to encounter stiff opposition. Even in times of relative peace, border officials may be openly hostile to foreigners or those perceived to be sympathetic to the enemy.

In times of war, it might be difficult or impossible to cross a given border. This detail can substantially complicate an adventure in progress.

Keep the border zone in mind as a special area on the frontier. Use it whenever it fits; it provides a wealth of opportunity for adventure.

Wilderness

Too many Gamemasters allow players to simply waltz through the wilderness with nothing but a token random encounter roll or two. Even well-known RPG Wilderness Adventure Guides are extremely weak in their treatment of wilderness adventures. Traveling through the wilderness is a dangerous and challenging task, rife with chances for rich and memorable gameplay. Don't skip these opportunities!

The trick is knowing just what makes for good gameplay and what to gloss over. What's boring to roleplay? Here's a short list:

Boring Wilderness RP 1: Getting Lost

There may be an exciting way to roleplay this, but I haven't found it. Being lost isn't fun. Being lost is every bit as dull as being forced to get out of a maze. The skillful GM won't waste time on it.

Forcing a group to roleplay finding their way for the sake of realism is boring. If a party does lose their way on account of a fumbled navigation roll, it might cost them time if they are in a hurry, or perhaps they are set upon by beasties. Keep those incidents short and get back on track quickly.

Nobody likes getting lost. Unless you have a specific purpose in mind, there isn't any good reason to have a party get lost in the wilderness. Viable

reasons might include getting the team lost so they can “accidentally” find an important clue or introducing a new adventure or sub-adventure.

Boring Wilderness RP 2: The March of Doom

The dramatic march of doom with heroes scrambling for days through treacherous territory comes off well in books and movies, but in a role-playing game the GM is better off introducing action. The same goes for exhaustion, thirst, starvation, and similar tribulations. Compressing a difficult journey into less than thirty seconds of description goes over far better than herding the team through a long, boring trek of survival. You may want to use a compressed journey to lower the team’s ability to respond to an attack, but avoid dwelling on the details.

Boring Wilderness RP 3: The Travelogue

We GMs naturally want to make the players happy. Some of us reason that more detail will make the world feel more alive.

That’s not exactly the case. Don’t be tempted to spend a lot of time writing up extensive details about the world you’ve created. Lavish, unnecessary details result in two things: boring the players and causing unexpected digressions.²

The Wilderness is Wild

The expert Gamemaster recognizes that travel is a rich and interesting part of any RPG. Here are some ideas for spending more time on the details of travel. In general, a GM should present a wilderness that complicates existing adventures or presents new opportunities for adventure. The standard, time-tested wilderness encounter is a monster. Those are great encounters but a game can incorporate so much more.

The *Wilderness Adventure Table* details twenty-six interesting things that can befall a group in just about any wilderness environment. A clever GM can probably think of even more. Things get even more interesting when the GM combines several adventures together.

Throw into the mix some strange local traditions, languages or dialects, poor maps and potentially worse navigation skills, traveling injured, pursuing and/or pursued and the GM has created an edge-of-the-seat adventure.

I’m not advocating rolling a die and checking this list every fifteen feet the characters travel, but keep up the sense of danger and the unknown.

² See page 255.

Wilderness Adventure Table		
	Encounter	Starter Ideas and Variations
1	Bandits	Weak/starving or powerful, could have hostages for ransom or attempt to hold the party ransom
2	Con men	Selling fake maps/cures/magic, cursed items, broken technology, rancid food
3	Merchant	Well-armed, unarmed, selling useful items, hostile, needing help
4	River	Detour or attempt dangerous crossing
5	Crevasse	Detour or attempt dangerous crossing
6	Weather	Severe conditions, unusual occurrence (tornadoes, dust storms, etc.)
7	Food or water	Gone rancid, contaminated, stolen, eaten by wild animals
8	Road signs	Leading to the unknown, missing, altered to lead to a trap
9	Hamlet	Local celebration, strange native rites, evil trap for the unwary
10	Local trouble	Feuding, xenophobes, speed traps, abuse of power
11	Thieves	Sneaks, comrades, just-passing-throughs
12	Unreliable guide	Unscheduled detour, extra fee or else
13	Plague/sickness	Must find cure
14	Creatures	Starving carnivore, Yeti, dragon, ghost, spirit, friendlies, space goats
15	Unexpected terrain	Mud, quicksand, rockfall, deadfall
16	Bridge	Scary or unreliable, toll, troll
17	Road tax	Bandits, corrupt officials, searched
18	Equipment failure	Immersion, freezing, heat or humidity
19	It's a small world	Chance encounter with a known GC
20	Combat	Mistaken for enemy, pressed into battle, mistaken for AWOL troops, aftermath
21	Traveler needs aid	Ulterior motive, trap, job or test
22	Ruins	Gang hideout, creature lair, friendly GC
23	Chatty traveler	Rumors, jobs, hidden agenda, trap
24	Messenger	Needs help with delivery, chance to spy
25	Troupe	Gypsies, carnies, con men, patrons
26	Keep or outpost	Abandoned, trading opportunity

Sea, Air, and Space Travel

Despite all our technology, modern sea voyages still have a certain element of danger. For example, even today sailors risk piracy, particularly in some areas of the globe. For game purposes I assume these risks don't change in the far future.

Some sci-fi games, notably *Traveller*, require a substantial period of time be spent in the process of traveling interstellar distances. In the case of *Traveller*, it's a one-week minimum of interstellar travel in jumpspace, plus a few more days of interplanetary travel time. A GM may be tempted to just say "A week and a half passes and you arrive in the Jewell system," but that's missing a great opportunity.

Think of all the fun that can happen during a week-long cruise where PCs and GCs are stuck together. There are plenty of opportunities for intrigue and adventure on a routine cruise when GCs are involved, from stowaways and fugitives, to hijackers, mutineers, saboteurs, and thieves. Each GC might carry their own Adventure Seed, waiting for the interest of the team or the right events to unfold.

It doesn't matter if characters travel on hired ships or own their own vessel. In the first case characters will have to travel with strangers, and in the second case the high costs of owning a ship will likely mean the team must take on passengers to offset the costs, a la the *Traveller* RPG, and best exemplified in the *Firefly* TV series. See page 280 for more on the *Mortgage and Maintenance Spend*.

Maintenance (Or the Lack of It)

In any situation where a vessel is traveling by air, water or space, it's going to need constant attention. These things are *seriously* expensive to maintain. In many cases, the maintenance costs are higher than the mortgage!

Most actual shipboard life is consumed with keeping essential systems in operating order, and this has always been the case. It isn't common knowledge, but aircraft engines have to be totally replaced or at the least rebuilt at regular, frequent intervals such as every two years. If one doesn't take constant care of their gear, it is going to fail, possibly catastrophically. Pick up an issue of *Flying* magazine. Towards the back they cover recent light aircraft accidents, and nearly always there's an accident caused by missed or improper maintenance. The same goes for sailing.

Maintenance gets ignored in roleplaying because most people's experience with maintenance comes from owning a car or house. Although it isn't wise, one can defer maintenance on those for years. If something breaks it usually isn't life threatening. Not so with boats, aircraft and spacecraft. There is no such thing as a minor failure at 15,000 feet.

I'm not suggesting the Gamemaster force players to roleplay changing the oil or swabbing the deck. That's boring! Just make them aware of the cost and time required to maintain the complex gear they rely on and let them decide. If they choose to properly maintain the vessel, make note of it but don't waste more than a few seconds on details.

If they neglect maintenance, systems will eventually fail.³ A party on a budget is going to be tempted to cut costs on essential maintenance. Low quality fuel, parts, and service will lead to failures as well. And we all know that Murphy's Law dictates that the failure will happen at the worst possible time....

Voyage Events

Even if there aren't any passengers or GC crew, plenty can happen during any trip. The *Voyage Events Table* has some ideas for interesting things that may occur during voyages.

Voyage Events Table		
	Type	Variation
1	Navigational errors	Bad charts, lighthouse out, collision
2	Pirates	Pay tribute, shanghai, commandeer, rob scuttle and maroon
3	Trading vessel	Dodgy merchant, disguised pirates or warship
4	Boarding and search	Corrupt official, bandits in disguise, their passenger carries contraband
5	Weather	Storms, meteorites
6	Mechanical failure	Minor, crippling, abandon ship
7	Creature	Shark, berserk whale, space goat
8	Uncharted island	Pirate base, ruins, future hiding place
9	Hazard	Reefs, asteroids, salvage wrecks
10	War	Skirmish, battle, blockade
11	Derelict	Booty, mystery, curse, trick
12	Sickness	Quarantine, forced diversion
13	Hijack	Political, piracy
14	Stowaway	Refugee, new henchman, mole
15	Sabotage	Minor, crippling, abandon ship
16	Passenger story	Patron, con, friend, foe

Passenger Story on the above table means that a passenger's story or actions act as the Adventure Seed.

³ See page 279 for a discussion of equipment maintenance.

Chapter 9

Beware the Maze

Traps, mazes, labyrinths, gauntlets, secret doors, codes – these are the most dangerous of all the tools at the Gamemaster’s disposal. On the surface, they can appear attractive to the novice GM. Yet beware! These devices cause enormous unintentional damage to the game when used improperly. The devices covered in this section are the most frequently used *and* abused in roleplaying. Here’s how to do them right.

Traps

Traps are *so* fun for a GM. They’re fun to design, and fun to GM. Traps are so common in roleplaying they’ve become a cliché. Many entertaining books packed with page after page of devious traps have been written. I’d be surprised if a single commercial *Dungeons and Dragons* adventure could be found without at least one devious trap.

Clearly traps have their place in an RPG. If a Gamemaster has a character on the team who has skills relating to detecting and disarming traps, that character had better come across them! More importantly, traps are a kind of Swiss Army knife for Gamemasters; they have many different uses, some of which are obscure.

Broadly speaking there are four types of traps:

1. *Alarms* or simple annoyances that bring unwanted attention
2. *Holding Devices* that prevent those trapped from escape
3. *Wounding Mechanisms* that cause physical harm
4. *Diabolical Machines* able to inflict lethal damage

Let’s look at each of the four types in more detail.

Alarms

Alarm traps have at least five uses: calling attention to something important, slowing down the heroes, depowering the team, upping the tension level, and as a stalling tactic.

Use an alarm as a way to communicate that something is worth protecting, or that someone is expecting unfriendly company. In this way an alarm can be used to focus attention on something the team might have overlooked.

Alarms tend to make a group more cautious and can (sometimes) slow down a gang of “kick down the door and ask questions later” Action players.

Silent alarms are good for depowering the team. Once triggered the bad guys have time to prepare, which substantially increases the challenge. A GM might pass a quick note to a player letting them know their character spotted an alarm and they *think* that it may already be triggered. Another way to handle a triggered silent alarm is to describe an eerie silence that descends, hairs on the back of the characters’ necks standing up, or some other indication that the team has just stumbled into a trap and it is too late to do anything about it.

Audible alarms are great for injecting tension. Few things make a team leap into action faster than hearing klaxons blaring. The most extreme example of this is an audible self-destruct countdown alarm.

Both audible and silent alarms give the Nemesis time to escape, prolonging the adventure.

Lastly, in a more spontaneous game, silent alarms are one of the most plausible ways to execute the stalling technique.¹

Holding Devices

Holding devices are designed to keep the trapped person(s) alive for later use by the trap-setter. In my opinion this type of trap is the most flexible and useful. Use them for spotlighting, benching, introducing, and rivering. There are two variations on the holding device worth noting as well; imprisoning and overwhelming force.

Spotlighting - Sometimes a character isn’t getting enough time in the spotlight. A holding device presents the ideal way to bring a character to the forefront. Make the character that needs spotlighting the only one of the party that is not trapped in the holding device. It then falls to them to free the team.

Benching - On the other hand, some players hog the spotlight and try to turn a team game into solo play. I call these people Wandering Players and cover them in more detail on page 236, but the quickest way to help a Wandering Player realize they’re part of a team is to trap them in a holding device, removing them from play until they’re rescued by the team.

Introducing - Introducing an important GC such as a Nemesis, a prisoner, a mole, or a sympathetic guard is easily accomplished with a holding device. Have the Nemesis make his first appearance when the team is powerless, taunt them and then make his escape.

Rivering - Lastly, holding devices can be used as a consequence that advances a stuck story but penalizes the team. Rivering is an advanced

¹ See page 258.

technique; read the chapter I dedicate to Effect, Mood and Pacing starting on page 217 before using the Rivering technique.

Rivering must only be used as a consequence. Otherwise players will feel as if they never had a choice and were meant to be imprisoned, rather than imprisonment being a legitimate consequence of a failed obstacle. For example you might use Rivering to imprison and therefore neatly transport the team inside the impenetrable fortress they have been sent to infiltrate, but only if they utterly fail to overcome the *Enter the Fortress* obstacle. As a further consequence they'd have to escape and might lose some of their gear as a result.

Imprisoning - Imprisonment is a variation on a holding trap. Stripping the entire party of their possessions and throwing them into a prison cell makes for excellent roleplaying.² Imprisoning can also be used as a kickoff Adventure Seed as it forces characters to work together towards a common goal.

The *Table of Clemencies* lists several good reasons why the bad guy might lock up the party instead of simply executing them.

Table of Clemencies		
	Type	Example
1	Bound by law	Humanitarian, age, citizenship, class
2	Lacks authority	State police holding Federal fugitive
3	Ransom	Ransom for nobles was often customary
4	Trade/Barter	Exchanging spies or POWs
5	Needs information	By interrogation, torture or other means
6	Not seen as a threat	Team not taken seriously
7	Political fallout	Nelson Mandela, Gandhi
8	Exert pressure	Relatives, underlings, or politicians
9	Cruelty	Desire to torture or greatly prolong death
10	Satisfaction	"You will see your homeworld destroyed"
11	Doubts	May lack evidence or possibly be innocent
12	Death is too severe	Milder punishment is appropriate

As mentioned in Rivering, one of the consequences of imprisonment is lost gear. Don't just put the gear in a locker – have the Nemesis distribute the team's gear to his henchmen. After all, wouldn't a Nemesis want to reward his cronies with some choice items? Perhaps some particularly valuable items are sent away as gifts or kept by the Nemesis himself. This amplifies the tension, fun and emotion of the situation. Everyone will quickly discover which items the players truly value. Make the recovery challenging, and give extra time for celebrating victory as they recover each

² Avoid splitting up the player characters, though. See page 235.

item. After this experience players tend to cherish their characters' material possessions.

Lastly, a dramatic escape is quite satisfying to players, so take time to create fun obstacles and make the most of it.

Overwhelming Force. Overwhelming force is the second variation on the holding trap – just put the team in a situation they cannot possibly fight their way out of.

Overwhelming force is also a good mechanism for introducing a Nemesis to the party. The party could be surprised in the wild by a large, well-armed band commanded by the Nemesis – a band so large it would be suicide for the party to attack it. They are effectively trapped and may only be let go by having to surrender something valuable or enduring some humiliation (or both). A friendly GC or even the entire team may be thrown into prison as a result of the encounter.

This is a great technique but shouldn't be overused with Action players. With Action players, overwhelming force should be handled quickly. Acting players will want to draw the scene out much more.

Wounding Mechanisms

The traps that cause physical harm to characters are commonly perceived as being the most fun for a GM. I disagree; contrivances that can hurt characters pose the greatest threat to a fun game.

Yes, wounding traps are great for keeping the group on edge or depowering the team prior to a battle. Keeping one or two damage-causing traps in reserve for this is a good strategy.

The risk is that by the time the team stumbles upon the trap they may *already* be severely damaged or have their healing abilities reduced or eliminated. A trap that may inflict only a minor wound to a fresh character may accidentally bring about the death of an already weakened character. Plan accordingly, and be ready to skip the trap or consult the *Table of Life Savers*³ if an unexpected death is indicated.

Diabolical Machines

The amount a lethal trap adds to the *fun* of a game is directly related to how long the team knows about the trap in advance. That's because it's only fun for characters to *worry about, detect, and avoid* or *disarm* a lethal trap. There is nothing less fun for a player than to have their character die in a trap. It's a shameful end for a hero. Don't let it happen.

Although it is perfectly reasonable to have a lethal trap guarding the final treasure in an adventure, the characters must know well in advance. The GM needs to be a lot more obvious than just describing skulls on pikes outside the temple, or a few shafts of light playing on the floor – players

³ See page 214.

can mistake such things for colorful descriptions instead of warnings of potential lethality. Instead use GCs to deliver rumors, let the party discover ancient books or poems, use dreams or soothsayers – just get the message out early. The team needs advance notice so they can prepare themselves through research, equipment, training, or by hiring experts.

If for some reason the team fails to notice the trap or fails to disarm it, do away with a friendly GC. Study the *Indiana Jones* movies for excellent use of lethal traps on GCs.

If you simply must litter your games with lethal traps, give the characters lots of advance notice, and use them only on GCs, never on player characters.

Mazes

Mazes of any kind should be avoided completely. In computer RPGs, mazes are considered time-wasters and a sign of weak game design. In a face-to-face situation they are also fun killers. If a GM thinks it will be necessary for a party to become lost in a maze in order to advance the story, that GM should reconsider. Mazes just irritate players and accomplish nothing.

This is another case where reality differs from fun. It can be quite fun to figure out a real maze, but in an RPG setting it just wastes time.

Labyrinths

A labyrinth is similar to a maze without the side passages, just one long, boring, winding way through.

Imagine this scene:

GM: “You can see thirty feet down the hallway before it turns right.”

Player: “We go to the end of the hallway, what do we see?”

GM: “The passage continues another twenty feet and turns left.”

Player: (sigh) “We go to the end of the hallway, what do we see?”

GM: “The passage continues another thirty-five feet and turns right.”

Player: “AUGH!”

Does this sound like any kind of fun at all? Of course not. Labyrinths, like mazes, have no place in a roleplaying game.

A GM should never give the players the illusion of a choice. In this case the “choice” is either go forward or turn back, which isn’t really a choice. Take them to the next actual point of interest (information gathering) or decision/action (challenge).

I've beaten the idea of preordained sessions to death by this point. A labyrinth is a simplified example of this. A better idea is a gauntlet.

Gauntlets

The gauntlet is a classic roleplaying situation – a bloody slog against overwhelming odds that leaves the team exhausted but victorious. Done right, characters running the gauntlet is a great mechanism to create a climactic end scene.

Especially with Action players, it's effective to set up end obstacles so that the team has to blast their way through a horde of well-armed foes. They gear up and go at it, and might take hours to plow through to the end.

Like a good trap, the existence of a gauntlet should be broadcast well in advance, allowing the team ample time to craft a plan and acquire the necessary gear to run it.

Because the point of a gauntlet is to increase the group's sense of victory by bringing them to the edge of death before they win, if it looks like things are going badly during the actual game, scale back the foes.

Secret Doors

Secret doors are irresistible. Everyone loves a secret door. The only problem is, they're *secret!* Somehow this point is missed by many GMs. If the team isn't forewarned about the existence of a secret door, they won't think to look.

A secret door is best thought of as an obstacle with a particularly critical Information Gathering stage. The GM has to let players know that a particular room has a secret door. If the information is too generic ("that castle has a secret room") the team will be forced on a boring wall-to-wall search of the entire castle and you've effectively created a maze. If you've played a lot of that ancient *Castle Wolfenstein 3D* video game you know what I mean. If it is too specific, the mystery and joy of discovery is lost on the group. One way to approach this is to split up the solution into at least two clues (location and trigger mechanism) that the team has to discover from different sources.

There's another good use for a secret door. A nice technique for giving a Nemesis time to escape is to have the Nemesis escape alone into a room and "vanish" by way of the secret door. As the team frantically searches for the trigger to the secret door, the Nemesis has time to make a clean getaway.

Codes

Junior GMs are often tempted to make up a secret code and force the *players* to decode a message instead of their characters. For example, the players are handed a sheet of paper with an encoded message and expected to bust out pencils and start decoding the cipher themselves.

More often than not this can turn into a huge frustrating time sink that demolishes the game. Either the players solve the code instantly, frustrating the Gamemaster, or they just don't get it and spend hours battering their heads against the problem, frustrating everyone.

Metagaming is what happens when players use personal knowledge in a game that their characters would never know. Metagaming is something to be avoided. Forcing players to crack a code is another form of metagaming, or playing outside the game. It has no place in roleplaying.

It's okay to use secret codes in a game from time to time. Just don't require the players to actually break out pen and paper to solve the code themselves. Their *characters* solve the code. If one of the characters has code breaking skills they *roleplay* the character's process of breaking the code. A GM should *always* avoid forcing the *players* to actually do the work.

I've come to appreciate the value of these techniques in a game. They bring a lot of fun to the table. Look for ways to incorporate at least one of them into every session.

Chapter 10

Filling Out the Adventure

Cultural Differences

A good Gamemaster uses cultural details to make the game experience more believable - primarily through short, vivid descriptions. A *great* Gamemaster uses culture as an opportunity to inject different kinds of conflict and drive interesting new stories.

During prep, think about the cultural differences between the heroes and any cultures the heroes are likely to encounter. Focus on the biggest differences first. Reveal these differences in encounters with GCs rather than using narrative. Be open to taking the encounter wherever the actions of the players take it.

Dilemmas

The best roleplaying will come when you put characters in a position that requires a moral, ethical and/or emotional decision. The GM should create moral and emotional conflict and constantly be looking for new ways to introduce more.

Observe the players and how they interact with each other's characters and with the GCs. Do they have a pet or a familiar? A loyal henchman? A love interest? An affiliation with a clan, guild, political organization, or gang? If the latter, how intense is their affiliation? Take careful note of what each player decides to have their character care about. Look at their RP Card(s) and compare, making special note of the character's Rights and Wrongs, and if they're used, *Sins and Virtues*.

The Fork

Next take two of those things and create a situation that requires the player to make a decision; their character must choose whatever they perceive to be the lesser evil, or find a really clever way out of the situation. In chess this is called a fork - when one player attacks two pieces simultaneously and forces the opponent to choose which piece to lose. *The Table of Forks* lists a few ways to use a fork. (I was tempted to call this table *Just Another Forking Table* but I decided against it!)

Table of Forks	
Type	Example
1 Right does Wrong	The character sees their 'Right' action do one of their 'Wrongs' to another
2 Temptation	Getting or being something the character wants conflicts with what they believe in
3 Internally at odds	Two of the character's own beliefs are at odds, one must be chosen
4 Character conflict	Two different characters in opposition, only one can prevail
5 Compulsion	An external event pushes the character to consider doing a wrong
6 Judgment	Two or more GCs have a need but only one can be saved/fulfilled
7 Groupthink	Do or accept what the group does or be cast out
8 Betrayal	Choose between friendship with a GC or an action that is considered betrayal

In the *Anneborn* session we've already set Arlon up with a relatively minor *Temptation* fork. How will he react to a job offer from the rich and powerful Marquis? Maybe Arlon's player will trust the Marquis, maybe not.

We also know that Arlon is prideful and prone to anger; these are two rights that can we can use as an *Internally at odds* fork. The Marquis is a clever man, and he needs the team's help. Perhaps he calls into question the team's ability to accomplish the task. Will Arlon take the bait or become angry and offended?

The fork is a useful tool for helping novice or shy players get into character, because the best way to show one's character is through action. Players unused to roleplaying might not even be aware of the trap even *after* it has been sprung on them. They often aren't as tuned-in to their character's Rights and Wrongs and also unused to acting out strong emotions with their characters.

As GM, anticipate this and pass the player a note or take the player aside *just before the fork* happens. The note or aside is always as a question – in this case, "Does Arlon still hate the rich?" The player might initially be puzzled; let them simmer in mystery. Once the fork is played they should seize the part. Don't let the fork pass without the player making a decision – and in many cases doing nothing is a choice; failing to save a drowning person is an extreme example.

Importantly, the decision is entirely the player's. The fun for the GM is playing out the effect of the action. If Arlon accepts the job, one of Arlon's

rich-hating GC friends might become cold and distant. If Arlon refuses, the Marquis could possibly apply another fork, or become a foe.

Keep those RP Cards handy. Refer to them often during prep as well as during the game session.

Plot Devices

A plot device is an object or person introduced to affect or advance the story. A GM can introduce a plot device anywhere, at any time. (Yes, RPGs shouldn't have plots, but they can have plot devices!)

Good plot devices blend seamlessly into the game. Players won't even notice. Good plot devices make life easier for a Gamemaster and more fun for the group. As long as they are not overused, they make for great introductions to adventure.

Some examples of this:

- The apparently random pickpocket that leads the players on a merry chase through town, leading them to the thieves guild, where a patron or Nemesis may wait.
- A Nemesis' elaborate plan to trap the players and confront them with lethal force is foiled by an escape gadget.
- A magic potion of water breathing found or given earlier in the game that helps the team recover an Artifact lost in a sunken vessel.
- The special item given to a secret agent during setup that just happens to be awfully useful evading a tail later in the session.

On the other hand, bad plot devices tend to pull players out of character and kill the game. What's a bad plot device? Anything that takes power or deserved victory away from the party. Think of the typical save-the-day technology in the worst tradition of TV sci-fi. Easy victories are meaningless. Never use a plot device that allows the team to automatically overcome a major obstacle.

Likewise, avoid anything that doesn't fit within the game reality. Throwing a machine gun into a fantasy world might sound neat but anachronisms like this only serve to erode suspension of disbelief. A GM needs to make plot devices reasonable. The better they fit within the game world, the easier it will be for the players to accept and enjoy them.

Handing Out the Goodies

Meet Monty Haul and Scrooge

One of the most fun things for players in an RPG is getting stuff. Conversely, one of the most boring things for players is getting stuff. The

frequency and cool factor of the equipment has a lot to do with the game being fun or boring.

It's a fine line the GM has to walk. Gamemasters risk disaster if they're too stingy with the goodies, but they also have to avoid giving items away that won't further the adventure, or giving characters items too powerful for their current status.

Monty Haul Defined

Monty Hall was the TV game show host of *Let's Make a Deal*. Monty was always giving things away, often cars, trips, and other expensive goodies. In roleplaying, a "Monty Haul" Gamemaster has come to mean a Gamemaster who gives too much away, usually by handing out ultra-powerful items to undeserving low-level characters.

The Monty Haul GM constantly and unrealistically showers a team with gear. His heart is in the right place; giving power to the characters makes them happy. But the execution is too fast, too soon. Giving too much power to characters always backfires, leaving the players feeling empty and cheated.

At the other end of the spectrum is Scrooge. The Scrooge GM never gives the characters anything. Session after session passes with little or no new gear. The group will quickly become bored if nothing new ever comes along.

Some Gamemasters play the Scrooge for many sessions and then suddenly switch to Monty Haul. The players will become giddy with the sudden power but won't appreciate the mass of sudden loot, and will often have difficulty remembering what they just acquired.

Instead the GM needs to ensure that everyone on the team has a chance to get an appropriate piece of new gear every session or two.

Loot

Once the adventure begins, sooner or later characters are going to get rewarded. The reward may be a \$5,000 bounty for bringing a criminal to justice, or the hoard of a slain dragon. Before doling out the loot, consider the matter carefully.

First of all, the amount of loot has to have a reason for being there. One wouldn't expect to find ten thousand pieces of gold in a wolf pack's lair. That the wolves dragged the carcass of a victim to their lair, where perhaps a ring can be found, is more reasonable. Likewise, one wouldn't expect to find enormous riches in a bandit lair. If they had such a hoard they'd be living the high life, not eking out a living as bandits. One would expect to

find riches in a dragon's den as dragons are well known to hoard gold and other valuables.

Second, rewards should be appropriate to the level of the characters. It wouldn't make sense for the party to find a vast hoard of loot in a low-level creature's lair – that kind of reward is too great for such a minor victory.

Third, if the loot contains items, they should always be of use to the characters. Avoid rolling a die and consulting a table of treasures. Every bit of treasure should help the group overcome a later obstacle. This may sound hokey, and it may seem like the players are going to find this silly or just too convenient, but that won't be the case. On the contrary, there's nothing worse than having a cool item and not being able to use it.

For example, say the characters are on their way to liberate a patron's wife from thugs, and along the way they "just happen" to bump into some burglars on the way. Assuming they defeat the burglars, the party might find a potion of spider-climbing which allows one of the team to ascend an otherwise unscalable wall, overcoming an obstacle for the party.

Fourth, the gear needs to be paced with upcoming obstacles. A player character should come across a low-level magical sword just before encountering enemies that can only be harmed by magical weapons.

Only GMs comfortable with on-the-fly play¹ should leave this part of the game up to chance. These GMs could use a die roll on a treasure table during the session and then spontaneously create a special obstacle that required the use of the item shortly afterwards, but this is definitely an advanced technique.

An interesting time to hand out uber-powerful equipment is right before an adventure is undertaken. Powerful equipment granted to the party in this way ought to have a limited lifetime, say a certain number of charges or ammo that can't be replaced. James Bond movies are a great example of this; 007 was always equipped with some bizarre weapon or device at the beginning of the movie that presumably only works once or twice. At the perfect moment, Bond uses the item. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Lady Galadriel gives the members of the Fellowship valuable items that each uses to further the quest.

A big reason for handing out limited-charge equipment early in the adventure is the tension some players will feel about when the right time to use the item will be. Match the uber-item with an obvious obstacle, but unless it is blatantly obvious do not make the obstacle dependent on the use of an uber-item as you never know what a player will do. For example, the pen that allows Bond to breathe underwater is useless until he gets thrown in the pool of sharks.

In general, a GM should make the most powerful items in the game system unavailable for purchase. If characters seek those items, that's great. Let them know the powerful item they're looking for is rare or illegal. If

¹ We cover on-the-fly play on page 255.

they really desire a particular thing make them work for it, and eventually give it to them.

Assume that every item put into the game will fall into the hands of the characters. Players are clever blighters and will find a way to get that +5 Lemon Scented Letter Opener of Eternally Stinging Papercuts if a GM puts it in the hands of a bad guy.

And that's only fair.

Because of this, when equipping GCs, be careful to scale the goodies to the characters' levels. An overly simplified weapon progression for an Acting camp might look like this:

- First game session - one or two characters get a cruddy weapon
- Second game session - everyone gets a cruddy weapon, one weapon breaks
- Third session - almost everyone gets a better weapon
- Fourth session - everyone has a good weapon, some people get excellent weapons, one person loses a good weapon
- Fifth session - one character finds one low-level magic item
Now at this point they're truly going to appreciate this item!
- Sixth session - everyone has excellent weapons, and another magic weapon is found, an excellent weapon breaks

Of course, I'm assuming that the Acting players don't get into much active combat. For Action players you'll probably want to dole out the gear (and break it) at least twice as fast.

Introduce gear according to the current power of the team, never giving an item too powerful or too weak. Once they're fully outfitted with basic equipment, then you can slowly upgrade their gear, one piece at a time. Gradually providing better gear makes the players appreciate each piece, and gives them time to learn how to use it properly. You can be sure they will be happier than if loads of weapons are suddenly dropped on them.

Maps and Map-making

Maps are great. They are fun to make, great to look at, and they give the GM the sense of knowing where everything is. Every commercial roleplaying adventure I have ever seen comes with (sometimes wonderfully detailed) maps. Some of us have been told that we must create detailed maps including every single room the team might visit. Fortunately it turns out map-making is *completely unnecessary*.

In my view, making maps is one of the biggest wastes of time in gamemastering. I used to spend hours making maps the players never viewed. Now I *never* make maps. Ever. Instead I use a handful of tables,²

² See page 264.

a few good books and make extensive use of the Internet. Commercial adventures or supplements are another source.

Why Maps Kill Spontaneity

When GMs spend a lot of time making and keying maps, they tend to stick rigidly to them. This encourages gamemastering on rails instead of the spontaneous action and flexibility that roleplaying demands. If a Gamemaster doesn't have a map, it is a simple matter to add a secret door, an extra guard room, emergency exit – whatever the story demands – during the session.

Say an unexpected turn of events makes a nearby alley, pawn shop, police station, etc. quite handy. With a physical map in the hands of the players, the GM won't have the luxury of adding details on the fly. Even if the map is kept behind the GM screen, the GM will probably be reluctant to modify it.

Maps do have their uses, it's map-making I consider useless.

Town Maps

First of all, in the real world towns don't usually come with ready-made maps lying around. One doesn't just walk through the gates of a town and get handed a map. Why should players get handed one? If the players don't have a map, the GM doesn't need one.

Putting the team in an unknown town without a map is likely to cause them to interact with locals, if only to ask directions. Even if they don't ask, locals can usually spot a traveler from a long way off. Some locals make a living from travelers. Of these, some are simply helpful, some helpful for a fee, and others have motives that might be sinister or good. The next chapter has several types of GCs that can be used in these situations.

These GC interactions give the GM invaluable opportunities to pass information to the heroes. It allows the GM to put the team into dangerous situations simply because they took a wrong turn. In short, walking about in an unknown town is perfect for adventure creation.

Even if a player decides to have their character buy a map, the GM doesn't actually have to *give* the player a physical piece of paper. Just say, "Okay, you've got a map," and now some things possibly get easier to find. That is, *if* the map details things the team is looking for. Ever seen a real world map list black market locations? Me either.

A GM can go ahead and spend twenty hours detailing every building and alley in a town, but it'll be heartbreaking when the characters don't investigate each nook and cranny. It is much more important to spend time working up interesting people to meet and challenging situations to put the team in than it is to worry about window dressing.

I only use town maps in the broadest sense – the port is over there, the palace over here, the slums there, etc. I let the story dictate the map. There

are plenty of historical books and RPG supplements with town maps, and these are helpful as starting points.

Interior Maps

Maps covering the interior of structures also aren't needed for the same reasons.

If you must have visuals on hand, architecture books, RPG supplements, and maps from the Internet can be used. But even this isn't necessary. You can use your memory of buildings you have been in, or even buildings from movies that you know well.

Dungeon Maps

We must have created enough dungeon maps by now to connect the Earth to the Moon. Why reinvent? Grab one or more pre-made RPG adventures with maps you think are cool and use them. Keep whatever is relevant to the characters and make whatever changes are necessary. The players will never know, and you've saved yourself many hours of effort.

Geographic Maps

As with dungeon maps, there have been thousands upon thousands of geographic and world-scale maps created for roleplaying. Use them!

If you're running a sci-fi adventure that calls for many worlds to be created, the job does become a little more time consuming, but there are alternatives here, too. The *Traveller* game system taught me how to build a convincing world in just a few minutes. A free software program called *Heaven and Earth* was written a few years back that automates the basic task of world building and gives GMs tools to embellish and add details. This is just one of many other free programs that exist to help the GM with world building. Lastly, don't worry about creating star systems that the team can't even reach yet, and make sure the team can only reach one or two systems in the first session.

It should be clear at this point that a GM should be concentrating on the action instead of the minutiae of a game. This starts from the first session of a new game.

Combat Maps

The GM might need to draw out a map for other reasons: for combat, when planning an assault, or other action. In such cases a quick sketch is good enough. I use the first letter of each character and X's for enemies and leave the rest to the imagination.

Production Values

I'm a bad mapmaker, and certainly not a trained illustrator. If the GM plans on showing maps to the players, he has to be prepared for them to have trouble reading them, and for the players to be disappointed in their quality. This can bog down a session as well. Avoiding this is easy: have the players make their own maps if they decide they need them.

Illustrations and Supporting Materials**Illustrations**

Certain kinds of illustrations, particularly of items such as swords, other weapons, castles, starships, and treasure are all good candidates for a picture. They allow the GM to give the players a unified sense of what something looks like.

Pictures of monsters supposedly add a scare-factor to a game but I rarely use them. Players are able to conjure up far more terrifying images in their own minds. However, you will occasionally come across a great picture that is worth showing.

Supporting Materials

There is nothing quite like handing the players a rolled up message or trinket to make the game more real. Or at least that is what many GMs seem to think. In reality most GMs are not great artists and such things never measure up in the eyes of jaded media-overloaded players.

I once labored over a hand-made scroll with burnt edges that got a couple of moments of attention and was literally cast aside. I remember being angry that a player put a drink down on it and left a big water ring on it. The players didn't appreciate the time it took and no wonder; it was a cruddy attempt compared to the cool mystical scrolls we have all seen in various movies.

Players appreciate it far more when you spend time developing worthy GCs and devising challenges specific to their character. Besides, you can describe a withered and aged scroll far easier than trying to make one.

Every GM has to decide for themselves how much time to spend on these tangible things. I have made enough maps for my entire life. I don't do it anymore.

Chapter 11

Adding the Supporting Cast

As you look over the session prep, check that you have minimal details for all of the GCs the party is likely to encounter.

There are two reasons for this. First, having prepared GCs allows you to relax and enjoy the actual *roleplaying* of GCs in-session instead of being pressured to create, remember, and take care of GC details on the fly.

Second, each GC is an opportunity to make the game more interesting, alive, and unforgettable. The best GMs play many memorable roles in every session. We'll talk about how to do that convincingly starting on page 189, but we need a solid foundation first.

Some people spend hours developing GCs, but this is overkill. Overdeveloped GCs run the risk of locking the GM into a static view of what should be a changing person. The more time and effort GMs put into crafting an elaborate back story for GCs, the less likely they'll be to make adjustments on the fly. The most central GCs are worth ten minutes or at most a half-hour of advance effort. These are GCs you expect to use many times across multiple sessions. Lesser GCs will take perhaps a minute or two each, and many require just *seconds* to create as we'll see in a few pages.

As the game progresses, because you have left big gaps in GC's histories you can capitalize on flashes of inspiration to improve a GC during the game.

Keeping GC details murky as the game progresses has other advantages. For one thing, if the GM doesn't know everything about a GC, they'll be less likely to give away too much information too soon. The GC actually becomes more interesting because of the mystery.

Recurring Supporting GC Roles

As you look over the various obstacles you've crafted for the characters, you'll see a need for certain types of GCs that keep cropping up game after game. Instead of creating throwaway GCs every session, look for ways to use existing GCs.

Players *prefer* interacting with GCs they know. With each new encounter, the team develops a stronger bond with the GC. Trustworthy GCs are worth a great deal to the Gamemaster. They make it vastly easier to introduce adventure opportunities and disseminate information that the players are

likely to accept as true, which will cut down on a lot of wasted time due to unnecessary player paranoia.

Recurring GCs also give the GM a chance to pull off running jokes. Re-use any GC that makes the players laugh. Say you introduce a slightly crazy traveling magician who is always accidentally blowing things up. If the players are having a laugh find ways to bring that GC back again and again.

Even if the team is always on the move, a GM shouldn't hesitate to relocate a successful recurring GC to another geographic location or to arrange accidental meetings. These kinds of coincidences happen all the time in both real life and fiction. They're perfectly plausible in an RPG.

As you craft the recurring GC role, put a few minutes of thought into the motivations, skills, and day-to-day worries of this GC before the session starts.

Following are some examples of recurring roles worth adding to every game. Also look at Wikipedia's entry on "Stock Characters" for dozens more great GC roles.

Secret Ally

This person exists to save the characters in case they get in over their heads. Choose a GC who is or could become the enemy of the Nemesis who is powerful enough or in a likely position to rescue the team. Make a note of the GC, and keep either the motivations, whereabouts or all knowledge about this person hidden from the team.

A secret ally need not be powerful. An abused kitchen boy might offer the heroes shelter or access to a secret passageway in a desperate moment of need.

The team may never need the help of their secret ally, but these guys are quite handy to have at the ready, especially if the team is in the Action camp. The *Deus Ex Machina* section on page 244 covers using the secret ally during the session.

Innkeeper

The classic fantasy RPG innkeeper who sees and hears all (but who probably won't disclose this fact to strangers) can be turned into a key resource for the party. In a modern or futuristic setting, this person becomes the barista at a coffee house, a nightclub owner, or a bartender. I'm calling them all innkeepers.

Naturally, innkeepers are first and foremost interested in maintaining the reputation of their inn and in the well-being of their regulars. To a lesser degree, they'll accommodate travelers and tolerate strangers – up to and including a certain amount of rule-breaking – but only if this doesn't jeopardize income from their local customers.

Innkeepers tend to be gregarious types with a good sense for business and customer service. They usually have respect and goodwill in their community. Because they're at the center of social interaction, they're often the human equivalent of a white pages and local newspaper in a village or region.

The innkeeper is useful in the game as a trusted source of information and a connecting point to other GCs.

Rumor-monger

The rumor-monger (RM) is an excellent source for passing on information and starting adventures. RMs tend to be down-and-out living on the street types who are forced to live by their wits. This low social status often allows them to eavesdrop on important conversations in plain sight.

They often have flexible moral and ethical belief systems that run along the lines of "if it's good for me right now it's good." Rumor-mongers have a special sense for sniffing out information that will be valuable, and a highly developed skill in finding people who will pay for the information, balanced by a complete absence of long term planning. RMs have varying degrees of success knowing when the time is ripe for switching sides. They're always incredibly good at talking their way out of trouble that would get ordinary mortals killed.

An RM is fun to play as a GM, and almost as much fun for the players. The relationship built between a rumor-monger and the party is a love/hate, backstabber/savior, unpredictable affair and is always memorable.

Merchant

A savvy and well-connected merchant provides much more than just equipment for the team. Merchants can provide valuable information better than an innkeeper as long as the area of interest falls within their highly specialized niches. They can be the starting points for adventures or provide helpful backup adventures as they're always on the lookout for reliable guards and trustworthy people to solve challenging problems for them.

Of course, merchants are primarily concerned with protecting and accumulating wealth. The strategies and connections that lead to more wealth are what dominates their thoughts and motivations. If the team can work within those narrow confines, a merchant would be a good addition as a recurring GC.

Sage

This GC saves the GM from boring players with narrative. Allowing the players to interact with a GC gives more opportunity to distribute information and is more interesting than mere descriptions. Any expert in

a technical or elite field can be a Sage – librarians, CEOs, shamans, computer hackers, scientists, engineers, doctors, lawyers, professors, and wizards to name a few. Sages may be happy to help for free if they're approached sincerely, or they may have extremely high fees. They might even demand the team complete some sort of unusual, bizarre and/or dangerous task for them before dispensing the knowledge they possess. Because of their single-minded pursuit of knowledge, Sages might be withdrawn, hard to find, cranky, and intolerant of interruptions to their research. They tend to value new or rare knowledge in their field highly.

Sages can be tricky for the GM as some players will ask many, many questions that the GM might not have answers for. Use the Minimizing strategy covered on page 257 when using a Sage.

Guide - A Sage that accompanies a team on their adventure is a Guide. They're even more difficult to GM; the team may stop thinking and start to use the Guide as a sort of skeleton key and expect the Guide to solve many of their obstacles. Counter this by making the Guide's advice questionable or less than useful. The Guide might be a quasi-foe, as was Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*, something of a bumbling savant who is usually right, or offer vague clues as would a shaman or other mystic.

Drifter - The Drifter is a variation on the Guide that allows the GM the freedom to drop this GC in anywhere, at any time, and pull them out again to add tension. Strider from *The Lord of the Rings* is a good example.

Cop

Law enforcers make for great GCs. Their access to special information, power and authority make them ideal allies and/or foes. Naturally for political reasons cops have to publicly uphold every law. Privately some may fall short of this high standard. This may help or harm the team depending on circumstances. For example a cop may covertly support vigilante-style actions, let someone access a highly confidential database, look the other way while providing muscle during an illegal operation, or arrest someone on trumped-up charges.

Red Shirt

Security guards in the original Star Trek TV series wore red shirts, and they were often killed off early in an episode to show how cruel a particular alien race was. If a GM deliberately sacrifices a GC to show players "how the monster works," or emphasize how evil a Nemesis is, I call this GC a Red Shirt. This can be an effective method as long as it is rarely used. If the team is constantly losing GCs they will stop caring about them.

Kitten

The opposite of the Red Shirt is the Kitten, a GC that the players will grow to care about and go to great lengths to protect. As with Red Shirts, the Kitten should not be thrown constantly into danger. Unlike the Red Shirt, the team will need to build up good feelings about the Kitten before they will throw their character's lives on the line to protect it. Some examples would be pets, children, and non-combatants like scientists, celebrities, and political figures. Newt from the movie *Aliens* is a perfect example of a Kitten.

Indestructable

The henchman of a Nemesis is often an Indestructable. The best Indestructables are creepy and memorable. Many *James Bond* movies feature them as the primary executor of the Nemesis' evil deeds. Remember the sharpened steel teeth of *Jaws*, or the squat, intimidating hat-throwing *Odd-job*? Follow this tradition and make your Indestructable spooky and a little bizarre; a dwarf albino, or a half-robot with black chrome eyeballs and scar tissue for a face. Like the Nemesis, the Indestructable should possess a predator's deadly efficiency and manage to miraculously escape the first few encounters. (Though I'll never forget the time a player character threw a pike straight through the heart of an Indestructable the instant he saw him. The player rolled a perfect score and I dramatically described the sudden demise of the Indestructable I was looking forward to using for some time. Ah well.)

GC Skeleton Sheet

Don't bother trying to create all the GCs you might need in a given game. Heck, even pre-packaged adventures rarely include all the GCs the team might possibly encounter. Save yourself the time and worry because for most encounters, you'll use a Core GC¹ or what I call a Skeleton GC.

A Skeleton GC is the barest framework for creating a unique individual. They're fast to create, easy to use, and can be developed into a Core GC if necessary.

I'll explain the in-game technique for using the GC Skeleton Sheet on page 260, but for now all you need is a list of ten to twenty names with two characteristics for each name; a single physical description, and a single mannerism.

Start by brainstorming twenty or so names. That's more than I've ever used in a given session. Re-use any unused skeletons to save time on the next session's prep. Use a mix of gender and be sure to include names that match the expected cultures the team will be exposed to in

¹ See page 71.

the upcoming session. I use two types of Internet resources to make the naming process quick and easy: lists of baby names, and RPG-specific random name generators.²

Each GC needs a purely visual description - a first impression. It doesn't need to be much, just make it simple and memorable. The first impression helps anchor the GC in the player's minds by giving them a single concrete thing to imagine. Use the *Table of First Impressions* covering the next few pages or make your own.

If you do roll your own first impressions, remember that they *must* be visual, able to be conveyed without interacting with the GC. Avoid using weapons, money, gems, jewelry or other valuable items as descriptions unless you're prepared to give them to the team. There is another reason to avoid clothing or item descriptions - you won't know what social class, profession, or exact situation the GC is in until you need them during the session.

You only need one first impression on the skeleton sheet. It can be tempting to add two or more first impressions at this point, but it is better to wait for the moment in the session when you need them to add the final details such as their clothing or other material goods.

The final element needed is a mannerism, something that you'll use to create the illusion of a fully fleshed-out persona. A mannerism is not revealed until the heroes actually interact with or observe the GC interacting with others.

There are too many potential mannerisms to list, but the *Table of Mannerisms* is a good starting place. Avoid things such as "messy eater" that are only useful in specific situations - a mannerism must be able to be easily acted out in any situation. Lastly, avoid accents as mannerisms - the GC's *society* and possibly their *culture* dictates their accent.

Most importantly, choose mannerisms that you as Gamemaster will have fun acting out during the game.

² You can find links to these resources at www.gamemastering.info.

Table of First Impressions	
1	Build
2	Ears
3	Mouth
4	Arms
5	Nose
6	Eyes
7	Facial Hair
8	Face
9	Hair

First Impressions Subtype 1 Build	
1	Scrawny
2	Squat
3	Huge bulging belly
4	Barrel chested
5	Giant-like
6	Short
7	Gaunt
8	Wiry
9	Chubby
10	Grossly obese

First Impressions Subtype 2 Ears	
1	Stud earrings
2	Hoop earrings
3	Dangling earrings
4	Multiple earrings
5	Missing an ear
6	Long earlobes
7	Stretched earlobes
8	Two earlobes per ear
9	No earlobes
10	Plates in earlobes
11	Earlobe cut off
12	Twisted ear
13	Ears that stick out
14	One ear sticks out
15	Cauliflower ear
16	Stahl (pointed) ears
17	Lopped or cupped ears
18	Deformed ear
19	No ear canals
20	Badly scarred ear

First Impressions Subtype 3 Mouth	
1	Perfect white teeth
2	Sharpened teeth
3	Metal tooth
4	Braces
5	Missing tooth
6	Blackened teeth
7	Crooked teeth
8	Rotten teeth
9	Two teeth left
10	One tooth left
11	No teeth
12	Wooden teeth
13	Buck teeth
14	Lip ring
15	Huge lips
16	Thin lips
17	Chapped lips
18	Mouth sores
19	Tattooed lip color
20	Cleft lip

First Impressions Subtype 4 Arms	
1	Arm in sling
2	Missing arm
3	Missing hand
4	One arm cut off at elbow
5	Massive forearms
6	Tattooed forearms
7	Tattooed biceps
8	Entire arm tattooed
9	Obviously prosthetic arm
10	Hook instead of hand

First Impressions Subtype 5 Nose	
1	Pug nose
2	Hooked nose
3	Beaked nose
4	Long nose
5	Upturned nose
6	Bulbous nose
7	Pointy nose
8	Broken nose
9	Flat nose
10	Nose ring

First Impressions Subtype 6 Eyes	
1	Glasses
2	Eye piece
3	Eye patch
4	Glass/wooden eye
5	One eye gouged out
6	Different colored eyes
7	Bloodshot eyes
8	Dark rings under eyes
9	Black eye
10	Heavy eyeliner
11	Wandering/lazy eye
12	Crosseyed
13	Eyes too far apart
14	Deep set eyes
15	Bulging eyes
16	Squinty eyes

First Impressions Subtype 7 Facial Hair	
1	Rough Unshaven
2	Bushy beard
3	Neatly trimmed beard
4	Pointed beard
5	Long pointed beard
6	Forked beard
7	Goatee
8	Braided beard
9	Colored beard
10	Full moustache
11	Waxed moustache
12	Bushy moustache
13	Half shaved-half bearded
14	Wood sticks in beard
15	Ribbons in beard
16	Five o'clock shadow

First Impressions Subtype 8 Face	
1	Facemask
2	Perfect complexion
3	Face scar(s) from wound
4	Face scar(s) from burns
5	Scabs on face
6	Open sores on face
7	Cheek ring
8	Facial tattoos
9	Splotchy birthmark on face
10	Prominent mole on face
11	Dimpled chin
12	Square chin
13	Rosy cheeks
14	Round face
15	High cheekbones
16	Bushy eyebrows
17	One eyebrow
18	No eyebrows
19	Short eyebrows
20	Pencil-thin eyebrows
21	Tattooed eyebrows
22	Eyebrow piercing
23	Brand on cheek
24	Brand on forehead
25	Face paint
26	Tribal markings on face
27	Heavy pancake makeup
28	Freckled face
29	Warts on face
30	Sunburnt
31	Wrinkled face
32	Weatherbeaten face
33	Pockmarked face
34	Facial acne
35	Partially paralyzed face
36	Delicate face
37	Sweaty face
38	Facial tic

First Impressions Subtype 9 Hair	
1	Flowers in hair
2	Wet hair
3	Oily hair
4	Hair slicked back
5	Unkempt hair
6	Windblown hair
7	Immaculate wig
8	Poorly maintained wig
9	Butch cut hair
10	Bald
11	Comb-over hair
12	Pony tail
13	Braided hair
14	Ribbons in hair
15	Wood sticks in hair
16	Dreadlocks
17	Hair in cornrows
18	Extremely long hair
19	White hair
20	Dyed hair
21	Salt-n-pepper hair
22	Afro
23	Elaborate coif
24	Extremely curly hair
25	Oiled curly hair
26	Spiked hair
27	Mohawk
28	Half-shaved
29	Shaved pattern
30	Shaved word or symbol
31	Pigtails
32	Mullet

After looking at the following tables you ought to be having a laugh imagining how much fun it will be playing out mannerisms. And I guarantee that the players will love your performances. Mannerisms make the difference between a memorable, interesting GC and just another boring interaction to get to the next fight.

I've had problems in the past when players remembered a GC better than I did because I didn't take good notes, so on the sheet itself leave lots of space between each skeleton character. You'll use that space to flesh out the GC and make notes when you use them during the session. For that reason I put no more than ten on a page.

Once you have the GC Skeleton Sheet together it might be worth a moment to briefly rehearse the mannerism you've chosen for each of the GC's on the sheet so it comes more naturally in the session.

For more ideas there are a wealth of other GC characteristic tables freely available on the Internet and in RPG systems and supplements. Unfortunately most of these lists mix (visual) first impression descriptions with (verbal) mannerisms, and even throw in adventure seeds, items of value and the like.

Keep the first impression distinct from any mannerisms. Stick with one impression and mannerism per GC - multiple first impressions and/or mannerisms are confusing and unnecessary.

Table of Mannerisms	
1	Word Repetitions
2	Unconscious Irritations
3	Tone
4	Hand/finger Behaviors
5	Speech Oddities
6	Inappropriate Behavior
7	Mouth or Eye Behaviors

Mannerisms Subtype 2 Unconscious Irritations	
1	The story keeps changing
2	Always seeking approval
3	Relentless comedian
4	Wants to be everyone's pal
5	Talks to self
6	Whistles
7	Hums
8	Always works a particular topic into conversation
9	Fatalistic
10	Pessimistic
11	Optimistic
12	Uses foreign words
13	Fails to complete sentences
14	Stutters
15	Speaks in questions
16	Talks to people who are not there
17	Facial tic

Mannerisms Subtype 1 Word Repetitions	
1	"Do you agree?"
2	"Isn't it?"
3	"Yeah"
4	"Yeeeeesssss"
5	"Uh"
6	"Like"
7	"You know"
8	Uses exclamations e.g. "By jove!"
9	Says "we" instead of "I"

Mannerisms Subtype 3 Tone	
1	Excited voice
2	Monotone
3	Bored tone
4	Petulant voice
5	Perfect enunciation
6	Speaks as if in a great hurry
7	Speaks extremely slowly
8	Squeaky voice
9	Deep voice
10	Nasal
11	Scratchy
12	Commanding
13	Resonant
14	Breathy
15	Breathless
16	Wheezes
17	Slurs
18	Sing-song
19	Mumbles
20	Formal

Mannerisms Subtype 4
Hand/finger Behaviors

- | | |
|---|------------------------------|
| 1 | Gesticulates wildly |
| 2 | Points |
| 3 | Slams open hand down |
| 4 | Pounds fist |
| 5 | Rolls object between fingers |

Mannerisms Subtype 5
Speech Oddities

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| 1 | Speaks mostly with eyes closed |
| 2 | Speaks loudly |
| 3 | Whispers |
| 4 | Clears throat frequently |
| 5 | Lisps |
| 6 | Refers to self by name |

Mannerisms Subtype 6
Inappropriate Behavior

- | | |
|----|--|
| 1 | Belches frequently |
| 2 | Sniffs |
| 3 | Fits of hacking coughs |
| 4 | Always chews (something) with mouth open |
| 5 | Always talks about self |
| 6 | Won't stop talking |
| 7 | Person of few words |
| 8 | Patronising |
| 9 | Constantly digressing |
| 10 | Uses foul language |

Mannerisms Subtype 7
Mouth or Eye Behaviors

- | | |
|---|----------------------------|
| 1 | Keeps lips pursed |
| 2 | Licks lips |
| 3 | Grimaces |
| 4 | Fake smile |
| 5 | Won't look you in the eyes |
| 6 | Squints |
| 7 | Wide-eyed |
| 8 | Blinks a lot |
| 9 | Eye twitches |

GC Skeleton Sheet

Lucio Richards	Perfect white teeth	Excited voice
Sammie Powers	Goatee	Often says "you know?"
Nestor Hegarty	Butch cut hair	Bored tone
Freddy Caldwell	Bloodshot eyes	Mumbles
Royce Eliza	Barrel chested	Constantly digressing
Fredric Flickinger	Missing arm	Bad comedian
Jake Muller	Pockmarked face	Licks lips
Wilburn Agg	Bushy eyebrows	Squints
Van Bishop	Splotchy birthmark on face	Nasal
Sergio Koepple	Deep set eyes	Always clearing throat
Malinda Harper	Oily hair	Breathy
Maynard Higgens	Round face	Won't stop talking
Major Minnie	Tribal markings on forehead	Pounds fist
Bailee Kuster	Hoop earrings	Fatalistic
Melvyn Beck	Ears that stick out	Wide-eyed
Alene Fulton	Chubby	Talks constantly about self
Thelma Barnes	Elaborately pinned hair	Speaks slowly
Deniece Eve	Cheek ring	Says "uh" all the time
Jenifer Style	Pointy nose	Commanding

Brute Squad Sheet

In games with a lot of combat it doesn't make sense to develop even a skeleton GC for most foes, since the heroes aren't likely to learn their name or do much chatting with them. However, you'll want to give a single first impression for each foe the group faces. Do this in advance to keep combat fast-paced.

Before each session, consider the largest number of foes you believe the team will encounter, and double that amount. Then create a list using the *Table of First Impressions* on page 143. No names, no mannerisms necessary.³ Re-use unused Brutes in the next session.

Tying It All Together

In summary, as you work up the obstacles in a game session, verify that each ties to a character's skill cards. Do your best to tie obstacles to Character Goals as well, using the GCs already created wherever possible. If necessary, modify your original obstacle idea to fit a particular GC or Character Goal.

For each obstacle, briefly describe each of the three stages. Leave lots of blank space between each stage and use wide margins so you can make notes and adjustments as necessary during the game. I call this a Session Sheet, but in practice you'll almost always use more than one piece of paper per session.

Use a three-ring binder for Session Sheets and accessory information like maps. This allows you to easily swap pages in and out, and the binder keeps everything in one place. This is your Adventure Notebook.

Essential Components for a Game Session

1. The chance that PC's might achieve a character goal
2. A Nemesis GC
(friendly GCs are a good idea but not absolutely necessary)
3. An Adventure Seed
(or a quick summary of past events if the adventure spans more than one session)
4. A number of obstacles broken down by information gathering, challenge, and celebration
5. Two or three instant obstacles in case the action stalls
6. Common knowledge known by the party or friendly GCs
7. A GC Skeleton Sheet and Brute Squad Sheet
8. An Emergency Backup Adventure (EBA)
9. Loot - both monetary and useful equipment

³ See page 261 for more.

Campaign Design

I put this section at the end of prep because campaign design should be the last thing the GM puts thought into. It is far more important to focus on making each session fun and filled with action than on the big picture, especially at the beginning. Much is likely to change in the first few sessions anyway.

Keep only the haziest campaign ideas in mind as you craft each session. Eventually the game world deepens, evolves, and presents natural opportunities on its own. A campaign should unfold slowly, with bits and pieces doled out over multiple sessions. Let the players discover and shape the nature of the campaign.

My favorite example comes from *The Lord of the Rings*. None of the characters knew the epic nature of their quest until they were deep into their travels. Some of them may have suspected, but none knew for sure. Gandalf didn't know Frodo had the One Ring at the beginning. Hundreds of pages of travel and adventure pass before their true goal became clear. Heck, even Tolkien didn't know Bilbo had picked up the One Ring when he wrote *The Hobbit*!

Game sessions should happen in a similar fashion. Go ahead and drop hazy hints about this or that from the start. As the adventurers progress from session to session, they will take an interest in certain foes and have an increasingly large impact on the world. It is far easier to connect the dots into a believable campaign when the details have not been laid out in advance. Too many things can change over the course of even one session to lock the situation into something as rigid as a highly organized campaign.

Yes, a GM might weave a complex epic over fifty or a hundred sessions with a predetermined outcome but I believe it is more important for character actions to have an impact on the game world. Predetermined campaigns do not allow for this.

Anneborn Session Sheet

Bawldok's Bane Adventure
Written for Acting Camp players
Session Title: Bandit Lair

Obstacle: Interview with the Marquis

Information: The Marquis of Yarlen invites the party to the castle for dinner and presents the offer to eliminate the bandits. The reward is set at 15gp for each of the two sergeants and 50gp for the leader, plus the gratitude of the Marquis. The bandits are presumed to be hiding out in the thickly forested low mountains and swamps surrounding

the citadel town of Yarlen. The Marquis' own forces are engaged in the Queen's war and his remaining men have been unsuccessful at finding the bandits.

During dinner the Marquis mentions that he knows a couple of people who recently fell victim to the bandits while traveling through the Yarlen Forest, Monkrat and Reelar. He notes that the attacks all seem to happen on the main road that leads northward from the Marquis' citadel town at Yarlen. He says the victims, a merchant and a courier, ply their trades in and about Yarlen and shouldn't be too difficult to find.

Challenge: Convince the Marquis they are the right team for the job.

Success: Awarded job.

Celebration: The team is escorted to the castle gates by the Marquis himself and receives a sendoff by the assembled castle guard.

Failure: End of this adventure. Bawldok's band grows in strength.

Obstacle: Reluctant Victims

Information: Monkrat and Reelar act strange when questioned. They both seem embarrassed or coy at having been robbed. If pressed they act somewhat cagey and claim to be worried that the party may spread negative things about them and further harm their reputations. Actually they were told never to reveal details about the bandits or they would be killed.

Challenge: Extract details about the bandits.

Success: A combination of sweet talking or bribery would probably convince either victim to reveal information about where they were robbed and details about the bandits.

Celebration: Monkrat and Reelar become Friends.

Failure: Minimal - team more likely to fall prey to archer bandits.

Obstacle: Surprise the Surprisers

Information: At the area Monkrat and/or Reelar specify, bandits are indeed camped out waiting to fall upon travelers. They will break ranks and retreat at the slightest sign of resistance or upon being surprised.

Challenge: Capture a bandit.

Success: A captured bandit will provide the location of the lair before dying. (If a bandit is captured unwounded one of his comrades will kill him with an arrow just after he reveals the location).

Celebration: The captured bandit pleading for his life.

Failure: Any bandits that escape will alert Bawldok and the others.

Loot: One or two used, cheap short bows.

Obstacle: Telling Paw from Print

Information: (passed to the player controlling Luke, a character with tracking skills) The high grasses along the roads should make finding any trails used by bandits fairly easy.

Challenge: Find a bandit trail.

Success: Careful searching along the main road will reveal animal trails that have seen heavier use lately. Discovering a trail opens the Delmore obstacle.

Celebration: Description of Luke's skill in tracking.

Failure: Bandits.

Obstacle: Delmore the Bandit Scout

Information: If the group monitors or proceeds along a bandit trail, the bandit scout, Delmore, will be encountered. If surprised, he can easily be detained and questioned, or he can be followed back to the lair. If not surprised, he'll immediately run off into the forest.

Challenge: Capture Delmore.

Success: After pursuit and capture, he will reveal the location of the lair in exchange for his life and his promise to return to his family's farm home.

Celebration: Delmore's gratitude for being allowed to return home and give up the bandit life. Delmore becomes a Friend.

Failure: If he is not captured he'll alert Bawldok.

Loot: A dagger made of an unusual metal that makes it lighter but just as strong as a normal dagger.

Obstacle: Barrow Swamp Quicksand

Information: Sharp eyes, or being forewarned of the danger, may help avoid this obstacle. The quicksand is not deep enough to drown a character but without rope and several strong people they cannot be freed due to the intense suction.

Challenge: Don't lose anything.

Success: Quick use of rope will be necessary to avoid losing an item such as a boot or dagger in the sand.

Celebration: Description of *almost* losing the item.

Failure: Lose an item.

Obstacle: The Barrow Monster

Information: The Barrow Monster always surprises its victims.

Challenge: Defeat in combat, or outrun.

Success: The horns of the Barrow Monster are quite beautiful and obviously valuable.

Celebration: Description of the final blow.

Failure: The creature will inflict heavy damage but will retreat after stealing a shiny item.

Loot: If the monster's lair can be tracked, two pieces of gold and nine pieces of silver are buried amongst the worthless shiny bits.

Obstacle: Vines over Leeches

Information: A smelly bog that appears to go on for miles in both directions blocks the path. Two vines have been attached to trees on both sides of the bog as a makeshift bridge. A crossing can be attempted.

Challenge: Don't fall in.

Success: No leeches.

Celebration: Seeing something large in the bog dive beneath the water after the last person crosses safely.

Failure: Anyone falling into the bog water will be set upon by giant leeches. If they bite, swamp fever degrades character actions but only lasts 72 hours.

Obstacle: Bandit Guards

Information: The guards are quite alert.

Challenge: Sneak past the guards.

Success: If surprised, Bawldok will abandon his men early in the fight and escape.

Celebration: Description of sneaking past guards.

Failure: If the guards alert the others (or the bandits have not been forewarned by other tasks failing) the bandits are alerted and ready for a fight. Bawldok will leave six men to detain the team as the rest flee or relocate. Bawldok will then relocate after abducting maidens to hold for ransom and use as human shields.

Common Knowledge: Local geography to the south: the Barrow Swamps southwest of the Black Briar Inn are the least friendly and least settled of the area. Rumors hold that the Barrow Swamps are plagued with strange evil creatures, ghosts, and quicksand. The swamps are large; a proper search could take weeks. The southeastern Yarlen Forest is a game preserve owned by the Marquis, and although it is lightly patrolled, there are no likely places where a group of bandits could reasonably hide out.

Notes for GCs in “The Bandit Lair” Session**Bawldok**

Unshaven with a poorly maintained wig. Won't look you in the eyes.

Once a renowned sergeant in the King's service, Bawldok fell from grace after his family perished during a raid. Now given to bouts of depression, murderous rages, and heavy drinking, Bawldok is nonetheless a charismatic leader of men. He is a cunning foe who has eluded capture by the Marquis' own forces. Bawldok's crew is composed of twenty-four teenage runaways, experts at bullying fearful villagers, but they have little actual combat experience. Two older grizzled career thugs, Smunchon and Kroll, add muscle and experience to Bawldok's band. They are occasionally joined by an outcast mage named Willdar.

Blackwell, Innkeeper at Black Briar Inn

Waxed moustache. Deep voice.

Blackwell knows Monktrat and Reelar's stories and those of a few others, but has little real information about the bandits or their whereabouts. Blackwell is willing to point Monktrat and Reelar out to the party at the inn if they haven't already been found.

Monktrat the Merchant

Extremely obese. Messes up everyone's names.

Monktrat will relay a terror-stricken account of being accosted by the bandits with little actual detail, and if pushed will overestimate the size and capability of the force he was up against. He was attacked on the main road about three miles south of the Black Briar Inn in the deep forest a few minutes after crossing a stream in a particularly wooded part of the road (the same area as Reelar).

Reelar the Courier

Black eye. Constantly digressing.

Reelar was carrying an expensive gift to the Marquis' third cousin the Count of Barawan who holds a keep on the Northern edge of the Yarlen Forest. Being only a courier and lightly armed, he surrendered the prize and was let go without much fuss. He estimates fifteen bandits surrounded him. He was a three-quarter's day ride from the village of Pwek on the main road just North of a large egg-shaped rock and in a heavy copse of trees. (This is the same area as Monktrat but the players will have to figure that out for themselves.)

Delmore

Extremely long black hair. Says “uh” all the time.

Delmore is having second thoughts about being a bandit already. He's poor with weapons, isn't getting along with the others, and is tired of being hungry and poor. Given half a chance he'll run home to Mom and Dad on the farm.

Barrow Monster

Simply a *Xorn* from the *D&D Monster Manual*.

In “The Bandit Lair” session, the party is tasked with ridding an area of a marauding gang of bandits. During the first obstacle, *Interview with the Marquis*, the team’s remaining tasks appear to be straightforward to the party:

1. Track the bandits to their lair
2. Eliminate the boss

It would be a short game if I only had two obstacles for the team, but I wouldn’t *present* more than these two to the group at the beginning of the session.

Since I’m expecting the session to last six hours, and based on past experience the most the team completes is two obstacles per hour, I’d prepare at least twelve obstacles plus several instant obstacles to be safe. Chances are the team will only complete six obstacles or less, which cuts my prep time in half for the next session.

Does creating twelve obstacles sound like a lot of work? It shouldn’t be. Using the tables, cards and a little imagination you can create an obstacle in 2-3 minutes.

Additional Obstacles for the Bandit Lair Session

Obstacle: Blackwell is Quiet

Information: Blackwell isn’t feeling too chatty. The team knows he probably holds vital information; how will they win him over?

Challenge: Convince Blackwell to talk.

Success: Blackwell points out Monkrat and Reelar.

Celebration: Description of Blackwell opening up.

Failure: Blackwell clams up.

Obstacle: The Ransom

Information: The party becomes aware of the bandits’ plan to abduct local maidens, and hold them hostage (or perhaps one has already been taken). Now a simple task becomes a much more difficult rescue. Presumably this also adds a heightened sense of urgency. I might also throw this in if the team is dragging their collective feet in town.

Challenge: Rescue the maidens.

Success: Maidens unharmed and returned to family.

Celebration: Description of maidens being reunited and the families' gratitude.

Failure: Maidens killed, making family members bent on revenge.

Obstacle: Whose Side is Right?

Information: During the interrogation of a bandit it comes out that the "bandits" are actually "freedom fighters" who are seeking justice for the unsafe and unpaid working conditions in the spice mines which the Marquis owns. Who to believe? Does the party do their job or listen to the bandits?

Challenge: Who to Believe?

Success or Failure: Depends on who the team believes.

Instant Obstacle: Highwaymen

Highwaymen fall upon the party (unrelated to Bawldok's band).

Instant Obstacle: Brawl at the Black Briar

At the Black Briar Inn the party runs into a local brawler and is challenged to fisticuffs. (This is an excellent opportunity to drop a new adventure seed, in this case a rival clan to Arlon. If the team follows up on the thread it could lead to several sessions of the Rival Clan adventure before returning to the Bandit Lair adventure. Or, they might complete the first adventure before following up.)

EBA Redknee Clan

A large gang of Redknee with vengeance in their hearts recognize Arlon.

For the *Frontiers* kickoff we don't need an EBA or instant obstacles as this adventure starts out in crisis. The team is trapped on a hijacked shuttle and must act or face severe consequences.

***Frontiers* Session Sheet**

First session

Written for Action Camp players

Session Title: The Hijack

Game Intro: Cradle Down is a system on the edge of the frontier. Long used as a graveyard for decommissioned starships, it languished for many years as a backwater. Postwar, the Alliance has begun a

program to spur trade between the conquered frontier worlds and the inner systems. The Alliance has teams combing the derelicts and restoring them to working order, which are then made available for purchase to ex-rebel officers.

The party is traveling peacefully to their destination aboard the Mercy class transport boat *Katie's Hope II*. The characters share a row of seats three across.

Twelve other passengers are aboard, plus a pilot and steward. The vessel is unarmed and passengers have had their weapons placed in a locker that cannot be accessed from within the cabin.

Five of the twelve other passengers are operatives of Les Chevaliers Noirs (LCN) who have been tipped off to Arlon's presence. They intend to hijack the boat, take Arlon to answer for his injustices, either press the remaining crew into service, sell them into slavery or maroon them on a remote moon of Down IV, the system's primary gas giant. In orbit around Down IV, ostensibly to refuel, is Le Chat Retors, an 800-ton mercenary trader of LCN, set to rendezvous with the hijacked boat.

The seven remaining passengers: two elderly travelers, a family of four (mom, dad, 3-year-old daughter, and infant son), and a mechanic looking for work.

Obstacle: Please Remain Calm

Several hours into their eighteen hour trip, there is a sudden bang, the lights go out, there are shouts and loud noises, and the artificial gravity is knocked out. Within moments a voice with a French accent tells everyone to stay calm.

Information: If the players ask, the party will remember four people getting up and exiting the passenger cabin not long before the disturbance. If they ask they do not recall any French accents from the crew before. The sounds heard might be gunfire, or they might be capacitors blowing. A successful check against gun combat will indicate gunfire. Ursa will recognize a substantial change of course being made.

Challenge: Realize something is not quite right.

Success: Investigate further.

Celebration: Passengers give nervous nods of approval.

Failure: (Failsafe) If nobody investigates, another passenger will get up and float unsteadily out of the passenger cabin and out of view. A loud noise will follow, then silence, then a hasty message from the same person with a French accent advising passengers to remain seated because the situation is dangerous.

Obstacle: Francois

Information: The exit of the passenger area is covered by Francois, a trigger-happy young lad on his second combat mission. He has orders to shoot to kill and is armed with a Gauss pistol obtained from the ship's locker.

Challenge: Neutralize Francois.

Success: Gauss pistol obtained.

Celebration: Description of neutralization.

Failure: Loir and Richard are alerted and come to investigate.

Loot: Francois has Cr200 stuffed in his pockets.

Obstacle: Loir and Richard

Information: Around the corner and just outside the cockpit are Loir and Richard, lightly armed with body pistols. The steward has been injured and lies nearby. He is bound, unconscious, and bleeding.

Challenge: Neutralize Loir and Richard.

Success: Obtain two body pistols.

Celebration: Description of neutralization.

Failure: Marie and/or the others dog the cockpit shut, sealing themselves on the bridge.

Loot: Between them, Loir and Richard have Cr610.

Obstacle: Marie

Information: Marie, the pirate pilot, is in the cockpit next to the bound captain. If dogged the cockpit hatch can be overridden with a successful computer hack. Otherwise, an EVA, explosive decompression or other damage to the vessel will bring them out.

Challenge: Flush out Marie.

Success: Marie will escape, vowing to avenge her comrades. Gratitude of surviving passengers. Press coverage (leading to fury at Les Chevaliers Noir and notoriety for the team).

Celebration: Thanks of the passengers, crew and reward from shipping company. Unwanted and unexpected media attention at the docks, broadcasting the character's faces across known space, including the bridge of *Le Chat Retors*.

Failure: The passengers and pilot of *Katie's Hope II* will be delivered to *Le Chat Retors* and be placed in the brig. Escape might be possible during docking and/or transfer.

Loot: Cash reward of Cr5000 per pirate captured/killed.

Segue: Character intros, pick up ship. Next Adventure: Encounter with *Le Chat Retors* at Down IV.

Common Knowledge: Cradle Down is lightly patrolled, if at all, by the Alliance. The nearest help is more than a day away, possibly as much as two days.

GC Notes for The Hijack Session

Foes

Francois: French, skinny, greasy shoulder-length hair. Jumpy, squeaky voice.

Loir: French, stocky and bald. Speaks extremely slowly.

Richard: French, grizzled beard, missing an arm. Facial tic.

Marie: Nemesis, French, beautiful, slender, catlike. Commanding, cynical, vicious.

Friends

Yog the Mechanic: Scandinavian, massive build, white-blond hair, friendly, laid-back, starts most sentences with "Oh, yeah."

Congratulations! You now have all the elements for a challenging, engaging and fun adventure in place. And, you are now a well-prepared Gamemaster. A little celebration is in order! Having made it to this point you should be feeling confident that you'll be providing a great experience for the players. You've also left a lot of room for spontaneity and fun for yourself. So raise a glass, do a victory lap, yodel, or do whatever it is you do to celebrate a job well done.

Part III

RUNNING THE GAME SESSION

Chapter 12

Tools of the Trade

One of the great things about roleplaying is that the players don't need *anything* to play. Not even a rules system is necessary. I once gamemastered a moderately fun game over a twenty-hour road trip with zero preparation using absolutely nothing but our collective imaginations. It wasn't my best game but it was better than watching asphalt roll by.

However, any GM planning to run an extended campaign will want some goodies that will come in rather handy.

Dice

Apart from the obvious requirement of most game systems to use dice for randomizing game decisions, creative Gamemasters also use dice to help set the tone and encourage action.

Setting the Tone

One of the GM's jobs is to evoke emotions, and one way to do that is with dice. Just making a heard but unseen die roll behind the screen can make a big difference in the atmosphere.

For example, if the game is slowing down and you feel some tension will be added if the players feel their characters are being followed or watched, roll some dice now and then as you describe them walking down the street. When they ask what's going on just say, "Oh nothing," casually while you pretend to look something up.

One or two die rolls like this can help spur the heroes into action if you feel they're blocked.

Spare Dice

Always keep some extra dice on hand for players who forget or lose theirs. It slows a game down when people are fighting over the only twenty-sider during combat.

Adventure Notebook

The Adventure Notebook holds all the Session Sheets for the campaign. During the session I lay the notebook open so I can have two full pages of obstacles in front of me.

A three-ring binder allows for maximum flexibility. Binders make it easy to swap pages in and out, which happens often as the campaign progresses. Spiral bound notebooks are a bad choice because pages can't easily be added. Say the GM sets up an adventure and months later the team comes back to the same place. With a spiral notebook the GM ends up paging back and forth between old and new material while the players fall asleep. With a binder the GM just rearranges the pages once.

Game Calendar

GMs need to track the passage of time in the game, and what happened when. Good record keeping is essential to track character healing, the movement of GCs, seasons, and all the myriad details of a game.

All Gamemasters have a limited memory. Without any records the GM can get caught retconning – accidentally reversing a decision, forgetting a key GC's name, or goofing up the sequence of events. This irritates players and breaks the suspension of disbelief. You can avoid this by keeping good records *in real time*.

The best way I've found is to use a Game Calendar, which serves three purposes. It is a place to record what has happened – and it acts as a historical record of the game. You can also use it to remind you of things that need to happen and should not be forgotten.

The Game Calendar is not a novel. Keep entries short so the game keeps moving, and resist the urge to wait until later to fill in details.

For all events except the session start and end times, note the *game* time (the time in the character's game world) *not* the real world time (the time on your watch) that the event began or occurred.

Tracking consumables might be more trouble than it is worth but it does help to remind the GM that something is running low, which can be exploited to great dramatic effect. If you decide to make the effort, track how much is remaining as well as how much was used, and of course track purchases or resupplies.

Set Reminders

As a GM you will find you are constantly in need of being reminded of things at some point in the future. With so many things to juggle it is too easy to forget.

To help with this leave space in the left-hand column of every page of the Game Calendar and use a pencil to mark a star by each reminder. Every

so often scan the last few pages of the Game Calendar to verify the starred items are still on your mind, always erasing a star when it is no longer needed as a reminder.

The real trick to this is being consistent about writing reminders, scanning the list, and erasing them when done.

A Historical Record

Apart from being fun to read years later, the Game Calendar makes answering these questions easy:

- Who was the last character to overcome an obstacle?
- What was the name of that GC the heroes talked to two months ago?
- Was there an adequate balance of obstacles for everyone?
- How much XP does each character get for the last game session?
- How many months ago were the travelers in this town?
- How long ago was the last Nemesis defeated?
- What phase is the moon in?
- What season is it?
- When was the last time a player was wounded?
- When was the last time so-and-so cast their lightning spell?
- How much light is remaining until sunset?

Events to Record in the Game Calendar

1. The actual date and time that the game session starts/ends
2. Any change in the geographic location of the party
3. Major events—traveling, entering a dungeon, the time the group began resting, etc.
4. Combat details—who was killed, wounded or escaped
5. Anyone who appeared to die (but did not), such as a Nemesis
6. Behind-the-scenes GC movements
7. Obstacles overcome
8. XP-worthy events including bonuses
9. Any duration or time-specific actions, such as:
 - Embarking on a sailing trip or entering jump space
 - Casting a spell with a time limit
 - Activation of a time-based trap
 - Incubation time of an illness, alien implantation, etc.
10. (Optional) Consumable items:
 - Food and water
 - Ammunition
 - Other single-use items, such as potions and grenades
 - Battery or fuel usage
 - Damage to items and equipment

Reminders to Record

1. Expected end date of a voyage
2. The time a spell will expire
3. During wilderness travel, the number of days until the team would begin running low on food
4. Expected arrival of a GC in an area
5. Expiration of an offer
6. The due date of a delivery
7. Expected date a character will have recovered from injury or sickness
8. Festivals or special holidays
9. Birthday of each character
10. The date a Nemesis re-emerges
11. The date a debt is due

Sample Calendar Page

	Game start August 7th, 6pm
6/1/1443 2pm	Arlon wounded by Bawldok
6/1/1443 2pm	(Nemesis) Bawldok is beaten back into caves by Arlon, rockfall seals off Bawldoks fate (or does it?)
6/2/1443	Travel with rescued maidens
6/3/1443	Encounter with wolf pack
6/3/1443 3:15pm	* Shewel casts Fear (lasts 1 hour), drives pack off
6/4/1443	Arrive in Yarlen, presented Order of the Marque by Marquis of Yarlen, victory feast
6/5/1443	Gwizbag challenges Arlon to duel for insulting mom
6/6/1443	Arlon defeats Gwizbag (first blood), *Gwizbag shamed and secretly vows revenge
6/6/1443 11-7	Resting
6/7/1443 10am	Travel to Black Briar Inn
6/7/1443 4pm	Encounter with bandits (CLIFFHANGER)
	Game end, 9pm

For the calendar itself I use a good quality leather-bound hardback notebook with lined pages, the kind you can pick up at any local stationery store (or if you must, a big-box office supply house). They're cheap, won't fall apart, and look nice.

I tried using a yearly "appointment calendar" but these are invariably created around five 8-hour work days with weekends – hardly the kind of hours adventurers keep!

XP Tally Sheet

During the Celebrating Victory phase of every obstacle, while the players are celebrating amongst themselves – high-fiving, gloating, or what

have you – briefly note down the accomplishment on the Game Calendar. If the game system uses some form of Experience Points (XP) to track character advancement, jot down a rough idea of the XP earned. If the system is more skill based, jot down the skill(s) used.

Attend to this small bit of bookkeeping in the moment instead of later. Keeping players happy means steadily increasing the power of their characters. Gamemasters who wait until the end of the session to note down accomplishments risk forgetting exploits and may rack their brains trying to remember reasons to award XP. It's hard enough to find ways to advance certain characters; don't increase your difficulties by poor record keeping.

There is one last use for the XP Tally Sheet. Use it to gauge how well you are balancing the adventure between the players. If the total XP for each player is roughly equal, you know you are doing a great job balancing. If not, it's a wake-up call to improve your performance as a Gamemaster, and you have a good idea where you need to make adjustments. In the *Sample Entries* box below it looks like Luke needs a break from the spotlight and Shewel should get more focus. Make it a habit to look at the XP Tally Sheet in this way during the session.

Sample Entries on an XP Tally Sheet

Obstacle XP		
Luke	Swing across chasm holding princess	200
Luke	Standing up to the creep in the bar	150
Sam	Talking innkeeper out of his pony	150
Arlon	Locating the bandit lair	200
Shewel	Pickpocketing gold	100
All	Defeating the Red Hair Orc gang	2,500
Totals for	Luke	350
	Sam	150
	Arlon	200
	Shewel	100
Optional:	Add up all XP and divide by the number of players:	
	Total XP	3,300
	XP per player	825

Graph Paper

Keeping graph paper on hand simplifies sketching out visual situations, especially combat, where the squares help determine distance. Some

Gamemasters prefer hex paper for combat, as it gives six movement choices instead of four as well as making it easier to draw circular areas. Hex paper is great, just harder to find.

Scratch Paper

Keep a good amount of scrap paper handy in various sizes. Use it to hand notes to players, track short term game information (like combat), sketch out notes for future sessions, make quick maps and the like.

3x5 Cards

I use these to track GCs and other game-related details. The number of cards adds up fast. All efforts setting the tone and keeping suspense are ruined while a GM is searching through a stack of unsorted cards looking for something. You can avoid this by keeping the cards well-organized using rubber bands, rolodexes or card files. I also use colored cards to help me organize. Green for friends, Red for foes, and Yellow, Blue and Purple for each of the three characters.

Keeping Friends and Foes Current

Don't wait until the end of the game to update GC Cards; every time an encounter ends with a friend or foe take a couple of seconds to write down what happened briefly on the appropriate GC Card. Note the date in game world time, not real world time.

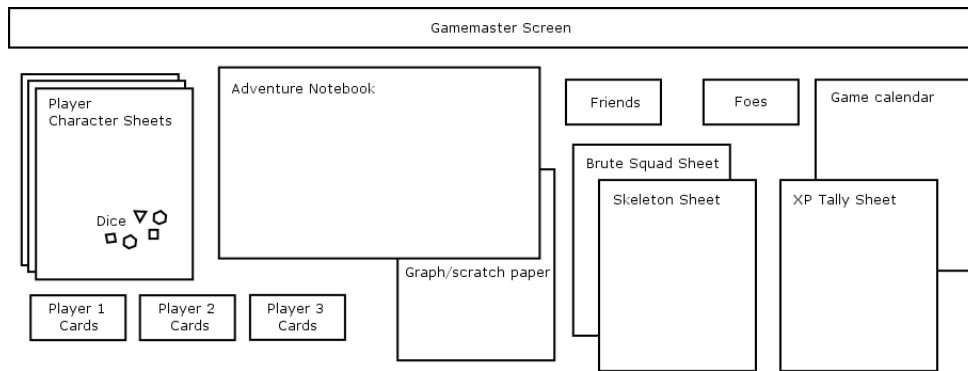
The Gamemaster Screen

A screen does many things. Certainly it keeps the GM's die rolls secret, allowing the GM to modify unfavorable die rolls (for or against the party) without the players knowing. Fudging should occur only in certain rare circumstances.¹ It also helps the GM keep maps and notes from accidentally being seen by the players. In general it helps to keep the players in a state of disbelief.

The screen can be as simple as a couple of spiral notebooks stood on end. If you are using a pre-made screen with tables and charts on the outside, cover them up. Charts and tables are dull. Unless everyone is roleplaying a bunch of accountants and actuarial experts, charts completely set the wrong tone. You don't want players thinking about charts and tables, you want them thinking about *adventure!*

¹ This is something of a hot topic in certain circles. We'll delve into fudging rolls on page 186.

Figure 12.1. Behind the GM Screen



You might find some great artwork to set the mood. Or reasoning, if they're going to look at a table it might as well be one about roleplaying, lay out a simple table of character rewards given for roleplaying.

Densely packed tables of game mechanics on the inside of the screen can be helpful for the GM. If they aren't the tables you want make copies of what you use and tape them on the inside of the screen.

The Art of the Screen

There are other more artful reasons to use the screen. The screen sets up a tiny but important psychological barrier between the players and the Gamemaster. It helps to define the role of the Gamemaster.

Hiding materials behind the screen makes players curious. Their desire to know "what's behind the screen?" is enhanced when the GM shuffles papers around and looks intently at something they cannot see. It doesn't matter whether or not you've actually got something written down or not, the act of furrowing a brow while pretending to read will make players tense or interested.

Use the screen to cover for any lack of preparation when a player does something unexpected, making it appear that you're just reading your copious notes, rather than looking like a deer caught in headlights.

Pretend to be shuffling through notes if you think players need a moment to think, or if you want them to think you are not listening.

Every GM needs a GM screen.

Snacks

A well-fed group (and Gamemaster) is a happy group. I don't advocate loading up on junk food, but busting out some snacks now and then isn't just good hospitality, it keeps people happy. Everyone should chip in and bring snacks of course, not just the Gamemaster.

Spread out the goodies over time instead of dumping out a huge amount on the table, because the session might not survive the resultant sugar crash or digestive siesta that sets in after the food is demolished. If a game session lasts through mealtime, break well in advance to prepare or order the meal. I usually keep the game running while eating, but I don't hold off on getting a meal to the players or they get cranky.

Music

Music is another tool for roleplaying and is described fully on page 222.

Books

I've visited quite a number of castles, dungeons, and catacombs throughout Europe and the Americas, and although I highly recommend the experience, a GM can get most of the feel with a good historical book.

I think the best books are found in specialty bookstores or online. In my experience, major chain bookstores rarely carry books packed with plans and pictures. When they do, they're often consigned to the remainder bin. Children's books like *How Things Work* or books with cutaway sections of ships, castles, aircraft, factories and the like are remarkably useful in roleplaying.

Commercial Adventures

It's an extremely bad idea to run a game using a stock store-bought adventure. However, parts of such canned games can be useful.

I love pre-made adventures for their pretty pictures and gorgeous maps. They can be a good source of inspiration too. My preference is for game supplements that provide only the kernel of an idea. RPG magazines and websites are rich with ideas and allow the GM to choose an adventure that matches the goals of the characters.

Props and Costumes

There are dozens of props a GM can use to enhance the feeling of the game. If one of my GCs is a Secret Service agent I might put on some dark sunglasses. I have a few hats around I can throw on to help me bring a GC to life. Props can be as simple as bubble gum or as complex as period costumes. As GM you can decide how involved you want to get in enhancing the flavor of the game with props and costumes.

In many games I've actually picked up a wooden stick and used it as a sword to describe some action a GC was taking or to illustrate a situation.

Just the act of getting up and moving around with a wooden stick injects a feeling of action into the game. The players will naturally fall into this rhythm as well.

Miniatures

There are some breathtaking miniature figurines out there crafted for roleplaying. If miniatures are your thing, go for it. Many, many roleplayers consider them essential.

Personally I don't think they add much to the experience. For me, they actually take something away by focusing attention on reality instead of imagination. Reality being a two-inch tall inanimate piece of painted pewter. Lovingly painted, but a piece of pewter still. I also find that using miniatures to keep track of combat positions leads to players making "that isn't possible because..." arguments which bog the game down in pointless debate.

Computer as Gamemaster Aid

Computers are great, but they are not appropriate for Gamemasters to use during the game. I'm no luddite; I run a software development company when I'm not roleplaying. But there are few things more boring for players than watching (or hearing) a Gamemaster banging on keys. The computer competes for a GM's attention and the players will feel it. I strongly recommend against using one during the game.

If a GM simply must use a computer during the game, a computer-based random number generator should be avoided. As mentioned previously, the sound of dice rolling behind the Gamemaster's screen is a powerful tool to perk up players' interest.

A GM should leave the computer for pre-game fun. This is where a computer can make a difference. If a GM has a bit of skill with a computer he can make sessions more polished and fun.

Obviously the GM can use the Internet to track down all kinds of maps and scenario ideas for the game. All anyone has to do is plug in a few words into any search engine and they're awash with free material. And some of it will even be useful!

Flowcharting software can be used to whip up nice maps pretty fast. I prefer flowcharting software to paint programs because flowcharting tools use a grid which makes it a lot easier to gauge scale when running the game.

There is a lot of roleplaying-specific software out there, much of it free. For a recent *Traveller* campaign I used an old but excellent piece of free software called *Heaven and Earth* that saved me a huge amount of time. *H&E* generates solar systems that conform to the *Traveller* rules – right down to

planetary maps. The software allowed me to focus on the important stuff – the characters and story – and yet have a rich and detailed universe at my fingertips. In fact, without it I wouldn't have had anywhere near the detail that I did, and this made a difference in numerous, subtle ways – like the satisfaction of being able to answer with confidence how long the day lasted on a particular world.

Now that we've got our gear together, it is time to get the session started.

Chapter 13

Guidelines for the First Session

The first session will set up expectations and standards that last the entire game. These will range from minor things like where people sit, to major points like how much roleplaying there will be, how people will interact, and how they will treat each other. The way the Gamemaster handles the first session will set the tone for the entire game and create patterns that become harder and harder to change.

Lay out four simple rules before starting the game for the first time. Discuss them with all the players and make sure everyone verbally agrees to each. As the game session progresses, if necessary, the Gamemaster must gently or humorously remind players of these rules.

Rule 1: One Person Talks

Only one person should talk at any given time. You must be as firm as it takes to maintain this rule.

For one thing, players get mad and frustrated if they think they're being ignored. Nothing says, "I'm ignoring you," louder than talking over someone else. It's rude for others to talk while someone is already speaking.

Secondly, it's impossible to pay attention to more than one person at a time. The GM's job is hard enough without having to filter out another stream of chatter.

Lastly, when more than one conversation is going on other players aren't aware of what is happening in the game. It's tedious to repeat things because someone was talking and missed a key description or action.

Usually you only have to make the point once or twice and the problem goes away. However, if it becomes necessary, take stronger action.¹

Rule 2: Game or Don't

Once the game starts, all talk is about the game. It breaks the suspension of disbelief when players suddenly begin talking about real-world events during a game. Don't let it happen once the game begins. For me it's the same thing as talking during a movie in a theater.

¹ See page 240.

This doesn't mean a GM should require all talk to be in character (IC) as this is impossible. From time to time players have to ask some questions of the Gamemaster out of character (OOC). We'll get to IC/OOC in greater detail on page 227.

Rule 3: The Gamemaster Has the Final Word

Certainly you must allow players to challenge your rulings; we all make mistakes. But the Gamemaster's word simply must be final. If players don't understand why a ruling was made reassure them it is for the greater good, stand firm, and move on quickly.

Rule 4: Honor the Start Time

Everyone must agree to show up on time for every game session.

Be crystal clear about the game start time. When someone does show up late, use the power of peer pressure. Bring it up right away and allow everyone a chance to express their feelings about the person showing up late. Let the other players know you'll be bringing it up before the late person arrives.

I've had friends who are perpetually late. Knowing this, I see to it they arrive early somehow. Sometimes I tell them the game starts a half hour earlier than I tell everyone else. Or I arrange for them to be picked up by another player, or call them once or twice to ask a game-related question just before they should start heading to where the game will be held.

With the rules out of the way now it is time to cover setting up and getting ready to start.

Pre-game Setup

Get some music playing as soon as you show up. The type of music isn't important. Just have it playing in the background while you set up, organize and arrange your GM space. Claim whatever space you need to in order to deal with all the paperwork you have. Set up the GM screen, take out the Adventure Notebook which should be kept closed until you actually start. Get your dice out, set up your GC cards, arrange the PC information in front of you with the various Skill Use cards visible. Prepare any props or costumes you might need to use, check that you have pens and paper, especially scratch paper for notes. Open the Game Calendar and turn it to the correct page.

Once all of the players show up, allow time for everyone to settle in and catch up. Pass out some light snacks and let the ice get broken. Once

the chat begins to wind down, or you feel enough time has passed, ask the players if they are ready to begin. Once everyone stops talking and turns their attention to you, stop the music and convene the game.

Shutting Down the Chit-chat

Sometimes pre-game talk goes on a long time. If non-game conversation just isn't stopping, and you sense other players are ready, tap a glass and let people know the game is going to be starting in a minute or two. Sometimes you can just slowly raise the music volume and when you are ready to begin, suddenly turn the music off. The silence always gets everyone's attention.

Convening the Game

Once you get the attention of all the players and the music is off, make an official announcement, something like: "I am now convening the game."

If this is one of the first sessions, or you have a particularly unruly gang, review the four rules of play. Confirm everyone understands each rule. Verbal acknowledgment is best, but get a nod and some eye contact from all players at the least.

The Session Opener

A Session Opener helps players shift from socializing into roleplaying. Starting without an opener is jarring to players and makes it hard to get into character. Instead, ease them into the game universe and their role with a standard opener. Novices tend to feel silly about this. If this is the first gathering, just about any Gamemaster is bound to feel a little nervous and possibly a little silly. That's totally normal.

If a Gamemaster gives the Session Opener the justice it deserves, the players really get into it. The way in which a Gamemaster starts a game determines how much players will get into their roles and sets the framework for all future behavior. If a Gamemaster is timid and weak in their opener, the players will follow that lead. If a Gamemaster is bold and engaging with the opener, the players will become bold and engaging themselves.

The format varies, but here's something to use as a template:

(*Cue the theme music.*)

"We are now returning to..." at this point describe the Universe briefly for about a minute. "Over the next thirty seconds [or several minutes depending on your group] silently look over your character sheet and step into your role, paying special attention to your quirks, traits and your goals. Become your character. [Wait out the specified period.] Now, when we last left off..."

Give a brief recap of the previous session highlighting particularly interesting character actions. Allow for clarifications or questions from the players. The recap is important because your players may have completely forgotten where the last session left off. It gives you a chance to remind players of clues they picked up or other important points before the action starts.

Then set the current scene by giving a thorough description of where the characters are, who is around, and any other important details. At this point actual play begins.

A Session Opener Script for *Anneborn*

“Let’s take ourselves back five hundred years to a world where news travels at the speed of sail or hoof - where the blade settles arguments as often as words - where mystical, terrifying beasts roam the wilderness. Where magic is beginning to fade and the age of powerful wizards is drawing to a close. We are now returning to the island of Anneborn, largest in the Celephon island chain.

“Over the next minute review your character sheet and step into your role, paying special attention to your quirks, traits and your goals. Become your character.

[Pausing for a minute.]

“In the last session, your group succeeded in dispelling the horror of Gowgitch and after battling fire wolves, emerged from the dark eastern forest, spending several days in the bustling port of Yarlen on the west coast of Anneborn, healing up and obtaining new gear.

“When we last left off, you had just been stopped and surrounded by a dozen port soldiers, who have not yet explained their actions. Any questions?”

A Session Opener Script for *Frontiers*

“Advance yourselves five hundred years into the future, to a universe where traveling from star to star is as common as jet airline travel today - a universe where after years of brutal war all 150 populated worlds have now been unified under the military dictatorship of the Alliance. On this frontier, pirates prey on the unwary, Alliance destroyers dispense swift justice, and desperate colonists cling to their ancient Earth cultures as they struggle to survive on barely-livable planets, often equipped only with iron-age technology.

“Over the next minute review your character sheet and step into your role, paying special attention to your quirks, traits and your goals. Become your character.

[Pausing for a minute.]

“You are all aboard *Katie’s Hope II*, a small inter-system shuttle that lifted off minutes ago from the backwater agricultural world of Cradle Down in pursuit of your hopes, your dreams, perhaps even beginning a new life. Your destination: a deep-space repair yard many hours away. Any questions?”

You might combine the recap with an accounting of the experience points earned in the prior session. If this is the case, pause before describing the current scene. This gives the players time to do bookkeeping on their character sheets, determine if they’ve improved and proudly announce it to the group if they have. Then recap the current scene and play begins.

Now the stage is set and it’s time to move into handling the session.

Chapter 14

Gamemaster as Judge: Rules and Reality

During a session the GM has three modes of interacting with players: Judge, Actor, and Camera. The GM moves fluidly between these three modes during the game, but each function is distinct and has unique best practices. Each mode is as important as the other.

Judging requires the GM to stand strong on decisions. GMs have to believe in themselves and project that confidence when making rulings. This can be uncomfortable among friends, but the GM must not be timid about challenging and correcting behavior that will ruin a game. When a GM does this from a place of “keeping it fun” the players will accept the judgment.

Many a roleplaying game has been ruined by a Gamemaster attempting to be the Supreme Overlord, who ends up being as effective as someone trying to herd cats. In reality a GM is in control only in the loosest possible sense. The job demands flexibility and a willingness to allow others to share in creation. I believe the GM must take the role as a co-creator and allow the players to have a major part in how the game unfolds.

The least used mode is Judge, or at least it *should* be - some games are so difficult to administer they end up taking most of the GM's time.

Ultimately, succeeding as a Gamemaster means having the players triumph more than they fail; it means the characters grow and learn over the course of many difficult trials and tribulations. It means that everyone enjoys the game and keeps coming back for more.

Skill Checks

Judge Mode is all about handling skill checks. A skill check occurs whenever a player helps determine the specific outcome of an event. I'm generalizing by using the word *skill*. Some skill checks involve only statistics, feats or other talents like spellcasting. There are many variations, but commonly the GM consults a table, makes adjustments called *modifiers* based on the situation, then announces a number the player has to beat in a die roll. The player rolls a die, adds any personal modifiers the rules say the character or equipment qualifies for, and announces the result. That's a skill check.

Say Arlon wants to strike an Orc with his sword. He announces his intention to the GM who cross-references Arlon's experience level with the (secret) level of the Orc on a table in the rulebook. The situation is not unusual so no modifiers are added, and Arlon also qualifies for no modifiers. So if the number rolled by Arlon's player is greater than the number on the table, the attack is successful.

Modifiers

Before the skill check is resolved, the Gamemaster must consider all the factors bearing on the action and add or subtract from the base chance of success as dictated by the rules.

Know the game system's modifiers and keep them handy. Print them out and tape them to the inside of your GM screen. Make quick decisions. Wasting precious time during the game while you flip through rulebooks is guaranteed to put your players to sleep.

Let's take a slightly more complex example. Say Arlon is battling an Orc captain aboard a ship in a storm at dusk. He has pursued his foe up the mast and now finds himself face to face with the Orc upon a slippery, swinging boom only six inches wide, 75 feet above the wildly pitching deck below. Arlon decides to attack.

Sometimes combining modifiers in complex situations can make actions completely impossible according to the rules. Having a swordfight in this example above would be quite hard but not impossible. We'll say that once we total up all the modifiers, the rules say it is impossible for Arlon to hit the Orc. Now there ought to be *some* chance of success, so adjust the odds to account for a slight possibility.

Furthermore, rulebooks can't hope to cover all possible actions, so sooner or later the GM will have to wing it. Say Arlon wants to attack the Orc *and* attempt to cut a rigging line in the same slashing motion while steadying himself by holding on to the edge of the sail with his free hand. I seriously doubt any game system covers that specific of an action. In this case make a quick informed guess, erring on the side of success for the player character. For example, if Arlon normally hits the Orc on 2 out of 3 tries, hitting the rope might only be a success 1 in 4 times.

Make Skill Checks Distinct

Some players cram a lot of actions into a single breath. Divide up the skill checks into several logical attempts if necessary. Say in the above example, Arlon's player also wants to grab the cut rigging line and swing to the main deck. That's clearly another action that deserves a second skill check.

Don't get too granular asking for skill checks or the game will slow too much. You wouldn't ask for skill checks for keeping balanced on the boom *and* drawing his sword *and* attacking. One roll will do.

Administering Skill Checks

Skill checks happen so frequently in a session it can be tempting to consider the job more of a bookkeeping task. This attitude leads to boring games. A poor skill check works like this:

1. The player indicates an action they wish their character to attempt.
2. The GM consults some tables and determines a difficulty level.
3. The GM asks the player to roll one or more dice and indicates what number is required for success.
4. The player rolls, and announces the number.
5. The GM describes the result.

Here's an example of how a dull skill check might play out:

Player: "I attack the boar with my sword."

GM: "Okay. Roll percentile dice, you need to beat 60."

Player: "45. Rats."

GM: "You miss. Now it tries to bite you." Roll dice. "It misses. Your action."

Yawn. Could this be any *less* exciting? Reconciling a checkbook is about as interesting! Consider this alternative sequence of the same action:

Player: "I attack the boar with my sword."

GM: (assuming Camera voice)¹ "Arlon raises his sword and brings it down in a great cleaving blow straight for the middle of the giant boar's head and...."

Here the GM pauses for a second, indicates the player's pile of dice.

GM: (assuming a quieter Judge voice) "...you need 60 or better to succeed on percentile..."

All eyes go to the dice. The player rolls 45.

Player: "45! I miss!"

Gamemaster: (going back to Camera voice) "...as the sword plunges down the boar suddenly jerks its head away and the blade misses completely. Sensing an opening the boar snaps its jaws at Arlon's leg and..." GM rolls dice, "...narrowly misses." Now the GM looks expectantly at the next player and the cycle continues.

A little more dramatic, huh? This is easier to master than it may appear. The hardest part is remembering to use the Camera and Actor modes *first*, and Judge last. The proper sequence becomes:

¹ A clear, emotion-filled tone of voice you adopt whenever giving descriptions. See page 198.

1. The player states an action.
2. The GM sets the stage for the skill check by giving an evocative description of the action in Camera mode.
3. The GM pauses the description just as the action is on the cusp of failing or succeeding and quickly determines a difficulty level per the rules.
4. In a different and/or quieter voice the Gamemaster asks the player to roll one or more dice and indicates what number is required for success.
5. The player responds with the number plus the result – “I hit!” or “I miss!” or “I succeed!” or “I fail!” (This may require a little gentle encouragement from the GM).
6. The Gamemaster adds detail, completing the action and smoothly transitions into a GC reaction or simply looks at the next player for their character’s action.

This technique does take time and self-discipline on the part of the Gamemaster. It is challenging to describe all actions in this way, but it improves the quality of the game as well as the fun of being a Gamemaster. The delay at step three creates tangible suspense as everyone anticipates the result. It’s a technique that should be used for every skill check.

The Four F’s

There are four things to be aware of when in Judge mode: Fun, Flexibility, Fairness, and Fudging. I call them the Four F’s.

The most important question to consider when making a judgment is, “Which decision will make the game more fun for the players?” Call it the *Rule of Fun*. In roleplaying, this trumps *all* other rules. All of them. Fairness, adhering to rules and achieving balance are all relevant factors of course, but we’re playing to have *fun*.

Things That are Not Fun

Before we start talking about what makes a game fun, we need to talk about what makes games un-fun.

Random Death is Not Fun

Number one on the list is a player character dying when the player doesn’t expect it. I vividly remember the first time I played in an RPG. I was in the seventh grade and the game was *Gamma World*, by TSR, set in post-apocalypse Earth. After 45 minutes of rolling up characters our Gamemaster started us off wandering in the desert. (This is quite possibly worse than starting off in a *tavern*!) As we crossed a road some kind of giant mutant centipede came out of the ground and ate me. I was dead within the first three minutes of the game. That was a fairly upsetting moment, and I wasn’t even wearing a red shirt!

What had my character done to deserve such a fate? Nothing. It was completely out of my control, and I never played with that Gamemaster again. If you want to keep your roleplayers, don't slay their characters unexpectedly, even if the dice say otherwise.²

Easy is Not Fun

A year after my first character became centipede lunch I was invited to play *AD&D*. I had completely forgotten about the previous disaster so I accepted. In this game I made it all the way through a packaged adventure called *White Plume Mountain* as a 5th level Illusionist. If you're familiar with that classic *AD&D* module you know that should be utterly impossible. Even *I* knew it as a rank amateur. It was a hollow victory. The GM was otherwise enthusiastic, but I never played in one of his games again, either. It was too easy.

Criticizing Others is Not Fun

Sometimes a player will fancy himself a subject matter expert on some game-related detail. This person can yammer on and on about, say, the historical uses of halberds in medieval warfare and how so-and-so's idea to carry it around as a personal weapon is just *wrong*. Fascinating, but the middle of the game session isn't the time for debating reality. When this happens you have to interrupt the seminar and remind everyone that roleplaying isn't meant to be real for the same reason that spaceships in movies make noise as they fly by. In reality, sound doesn't travel in space, but that's boring. Yes, people didn't carry around halberds for personal defense, but if one of the players thinks halberds are cool, let them!

The Mundane is Rarely Fun

People don't want to roleplay the mundane details of everyday life. A funny cartoon in the old *AD&D Dungeon Master's Guide* made this point; it featured two wizards talking about roleplaying as ordinary people in a game set in our present day.

I once played with a Gamemaster who required the PCs to go to the bathroom from time to time, with particularly messy repercussions if the players forgot! Amazingly, he wasn't being funny, he was serious. We challenged the GM on the issue but he wouldn't budge. Ultimately, we left to seek another game.

Similarly, taking time out of the story to roleplay the finding, planning, preparing or consuming of foodstuffs is going to detract from the fun. Occasionally the party may be concerned about edibles. They might be lost in the wilderness. In this case definitely keep track of food supply. If the team has been eating grass to stay alive, roleplay out their first meal when they return to town.

² See page 213.

There is a reason why action movies and works of fiction usually leave out a lot of detail, including biological necessities. Mundane details don't move the story forward! We can safely assume that characters will find a way to relieve themselves properly.

Fun

Keep the gameplay focused on the fun stuff: conflict, heroics, and rewards.

Conflict is Fun

Fun comes from battling against difficult odds, making meaningful sacrifices, failing along the way, and eventually succeeding. Getting into a major knock-down combat, sustaining significant damage and knowing that there are other enemies about, now *that* is exciting.

The easiest place to set the tone of conflict is with a fight. Early on in the game get the characters into a melee and take them within a hair's breadth of life. Let them tiptoe around, scare them with some noises, or perhaps a small non-threatening animal. Carry that on for a bit, then let them recover.

Keep throwing just enough at the team so they succeed, but at some cost: ammo spent, damaged equipment, injuries, fuel consumed, lost GCs, negative consequences in the world. When they are almost overwhelmed, they overcome the threat, get more ammo and equipment, and heal up, ready for the next obstacle.

The GM might find the team becoming overly cautious. In this case set up an ambush that forces combat and throw them a spectacular success against a lot of enemies.

Heroics are Fun

Players don't want reality. If they wanted reality, they wouldn't be *roleplaying*. A successful GM gives his players an unreal experience filled with heroics, outlandish actions, and epic adventure.

In real life fights a great deal of time can pass as opponents taunt, posture, chest-beat, maneuver for an opening, stare down an opponent, and frankly summon the nerve to fight. But once people do come to blows the fight is usually over in seconds, except between closely matched foes. Keeping up a fist fight for just two or three minutes is incredibly exhausting. Pro boxing or even Ultimate Fighting aren't exceptions as they have strict rules designed to prolong fighting and increase the entertainment value – rules that are unlikely to be followed in an actual life-threatening situation. Even group brawls are resolved fairly quickly. Instead, heroic RPG battles should be drawn out much more than they would be in real life and given the flash and style of an excellent action movie.

One of my favorite gaming moments occurred gamemastering a *Cyberpunk* adventure. One of the heroes had to climb the last few stories in the elevator shaft of a mega-skyscraper. The character blew a skill check against climbing and began falling. We spent a hilarious few minutes of gameplay as the player kept coming up with clever ways to break his character's fall down the shaft (and tragically kept failing skill checks!) If I had insisted on reality, the character would simply have plummeted to his death.

On the other side of the spectrum, in one of my least favorite gaming moments, it took two hours to plow agonizingly through a minute or two of combat. The GM and players were bogged down in calculating action points and cross-referencing actions against a mammoth table. The rules were such an obstacle that the experience felt more like a math test than a heroic adventure.

Rewards are Fun

Once the challenge has been overcome, focus on the rewards. Rewards come in many forms, from money and equipment to increased status in the world. Or a reward can be as simple as a well-described action.³

Fairness

The judging aspect of the GM has to *feel* fair to the players. In practice this means judgments being heavily weighted towards the party. To put it bluntly, the players are not showing up at a roleplaying game to determine if their character can fairly best an Orc in battle. They are there to heroically kick Orc butt! If in fact they *are* showing up for a fair contest, congratulations, you've got a bunch of wargamers or boardgamers on your hands. Bust out the *Warhammer 40k* or Napoleonic miniatures and have a ball. Or fire up a videogame console, throw a LAN party, play *Monopoly*. All of these activities are fun and fair, but they aren't roleplaying.

We don't *need* a neutral referee in roleplaying. Most games require a referee because there are competing teams. Gamemasters don't compete with the players. Fairly handling a GM competing against the players requires another person, neither GM nor player, to take on the role of the referee (which sounds like a pretty dull job). This also fundamentally changes the spirit of play from a cooperative game into a competitive one.

Flexibility

Furthermore, neutral referees are not given leeway to make up new rules. Their choices are black and white. The ball is either in or out; the player was fouled or not fouled. The rules are clear and actions are limited.

³ See page 101, Celebrating Victory.

In roleplaying the GM must often make up new rules because actions are unlimited and no system, no matter how thorough, can ever hope to encompass all actions.

Yes, rules are important in roleplaying but a great session demands flexibility and artistry. Don't leave it to chance.

Because there are an infinite number of actions available to players, no system of rules can cover every eventuality. When an action is not covered by the rules, the GM has to make up a ruling on the spot. Even actions covered by the rules require the GM to assess the level of challenge or stack modifiers. This enormous gray area requires creative interpretation from the GM, and every game system *must* allow the GM this level of flexibility. You won't be able to find a roleplaying game that says otherwise. As Gamemasters we have broad permission from the rule system to change or invent rules and alter random occurrences based on our opinion alone. So feel confident in that and do your best.

Fudging

There are two purposes for rules in an RPG. First, they allow players to focus on their character and understand how the universe works from a layman's perspective. Rules allow the players to take the difficulty of game design and balance for granted. They level the playing field between players.

Secondly, rules in an RPG exist to simplify the Gamemaster's administrative overhead, allowing him to focus on bringing to life a vibrant universe and concentrate on making sure that everyone is enjoying the game.

The rules do *not* exist to hamstring the GM into making arbitrary decisions. It is well within the authority of the Gamemaster to alter the result of a skill check, damage result or other unfavorable roll.

It is best to restrict yourself to fudging *only* if a player character's life will be forfeit unwillingly. Understand this well; I am not saying fudge every die roll. In fact:

The vast majority of outcomes ought to be settled by random die rolls or whatever method the game system uses.

I'm talking like ninety-nine percent of the time. I feel so strongly about it that this is the only place in the book I've used bold formatting on a block of text. Inevitably someone is going to take this as an endorsement to fudge most of the time, which I emphatically disagree with.

When you fudge, *never* tell the players because doing so serves nothing and, worse yet, it breaks people's suspension of disbelief.

Keep it Moving

Never allow the game to get bogged down administering rules. It's true that skilled GMs can whip through systems that at first glance seem impossibly cumbersome, but that level of mastery requires a lot of time. I personally prefer game systems that dispense with complex rules.

If you find yourself constantly referring to rules during the game, stopping action to do so for more than a few seconds, that signals a need to bone up on the rules or change systems. If the GM persists in stopping action to consult the rules, or action starts feeling like an interactive math quiz, the game will suffer. Players will get bored, they'll begin to doubt the GM's judgments and may even challenge decisions. Eventually they'll stick to simple, boring actions because they can't stand the waiting. Just ask anyone who has tried grappling using *AD&D* 3.5 rules!

It isn't worth the effort to master some game systems; their rules are simply too arcane. Change the rules or change the system if the game isn't flowing. It is better to incur the pain of changing systems once rather than to suffer the enduring agony of a game focused primarily on rules.

Judge mode should require the least amount of your time, but that doesn't make it any less critical. During the session you'll be called upon to calculate many modifiers and judge many skill checks. When doing so keep the Four F's in mind: Fun, Flexibility, Fairness and Fudging. Keep the focus away from rules and administration and your game will be golden.

Chapter 15

Gamemaster as Actor: Using GCs Effectively

The second GM function is as an actor. Whenever the team encounters anything they can interact with, the GM takes on the role of whatever it is – be it a person, monster, magically intelligent sword, artificial intelligence, or pet.

Astoundingly, many Gamemasters never act out the role of characters in their games. They simply describe how a GC reacts or give a loose recounting of what someone has said. How can a Gamemaster expect players to roleplay their characters if the Gamemaster doesn't roleplay the GCs?

So let's break down Actor mode into some basic rules and solid techniques. All you need to add is practice.

Overcoming Stage Fright

It is normal to feel a little nervous as a new Gamemaster, and a lot of that nervousness centers on Actor mode. If you're the GM, you have to be the first to act out a role, and that can feel a little strange. I think this nervousness is why a lot of GMs avoid Actor mode, even though I believe it is the most fun of the three modes.

Nobody wants to look foolish among friends, that's for sure. But your friends aren't going to judge you harshly for trying something new. It's not as if you are performing to an audience of strangers who are going to boo, hiss and throw tomatoes at you. It's all in good fun. Mistakes are going to be quickly forgiven and forgotten by the players. Don't dwell on the mistakes, just plunge ahead.

Bringing a GC to life takes a little practice. Like everything we try for the first time, we all start out awkward and if we work at it we get better and eventually great. Acting is the same thing. Fortunately, most sessions will have many opportunities for the GM to polish his skills.

Avoid Scripts

Scripts are for movies, theatre, and the like. They have no place whatsoever in an RPG. You'll often find blocks of scripted dialogue in a commercial adventure, but they're never meant to be read word-for-word. They're meant for the GM to read, internalize, and then restate them in their own words as they see fit.

In the same way, a GM should never script or write down anything that a GC will say word-for-word, or read anything off of a piece of paper. It will come off wooden and boring. We have better techniques.

How to Act in an RPG

There are four techniques used to make a GC come to life in the Actor mode: start from culture, use mannerisms to differentiate, always play from motivations, and factor in the player character's influence. You won't always use all four, but the more you do, the more real your GC will feel to the players.

Culture

The GC's social class, verbals, and complexities provide a solid foundation to work from.

Look over the GC's culture and use it as a guide that partially shapes how the GC views the world, what they believe is right and wrong, how they relate to others. Take into account the culture of the GC compared to that of the team, paying particular attention to social class and taboos, as well as how much the GC and the GC's culture thinks the *culture* of the heroes has treated him, his family, and his comrades. For example, if the GC's culture is at war with the culture of one of the team, that's going to start any relationship on the wrong foot. Or perhaps the GC is in a higher or lower class than that of the heroes.

Accents

It is easier to use real-world accents rather than try to create your own. If you're a novice, stick to accents that you know you can pull off. For me that means mostly European accents.

There are several ways to get better at accents. Your local library should have audio tapes or CDs designed for actors to study and train in a specific accent. Turning to the fabulous Internet, there are resources such as the Speech Accent Archive at <http://accent.gmu.edu> with over a thousand sound samples of different accents.

I try to practice different accents whenever I hear them. Movies and sports interviews (such as Formula 1 racing with many different nations represented with English being the primary language) offer good opportunities to mimic different accents.

Stereotyping

Only a fool stereotypes people in real life, but as a GM you *should* stereotype your GCs. It makes the game easier if you do, and it helps to reinforce the idea of distinct cultural groups in the player's minds. Early

interactions with GCs should reinforce that GC's stereotype – the typical cultural behavior for that group. If the adventurers take the time to get to know the GC, highlight the ways they deviate from the stereotype.

For example, all West Anneborian soldiers speak in a heavy, drawling Scottish accent, are quite talkative, don't have a lot of education and tend to travel in groups. This is the default I'd use until I want to highlight a particular West Anneborian soldier. The easiest way to do that is with a mannerism.

Mannerisms

Unless the GC has an extremely minor role, always look for a way to incorporate a mannerism into any GC interaction with the heroes. Mannerisms help to cement the GC into the player's memories. They make acting the GC a lot more fun for the GM. And they greatly simplify the art of acting.

Any GC you're likely to use – Core GCs and Skeleton GCs – should already have a mannerism from the *Table of Mannerisms* on page 147 to give the GC a unique voice and/or manner. Don't hold back – ham it up!

Just by taking on a slightly different tone of voice you begin to conjure up a compelling character for the players to interact with. Experiment with using a slower or faster pace when speaking. Using certain words or phrases repeatedly, or gesturing in a certain way also works. One way to improve your skill at mannerisms is to watch movies with a critical eye, observing what actors do to project a certain role.

Motivations

Expert GMs are convincing as GCs because they always act from the motivations of the GC. If the encounter is meaningful, before they speak or take an action as a GC, they first consider the GC's motivations.

There are only two details required: what does this GC want, and how do they feel right now?

Either choose a single goal listed on their GC Card or pick something that seems likely from the *Resident Woes Table* on page 109. See every encounter with a GC as an opportunity for new adventure.

Certainly the more clever GCs might hide their actual goals, leaving the players to guess their ulterior motives, but regardless of their smarts, the GC always wants something. Always speak and take action from that place.

Then consider what their emotional state is at the moment. How do they feel right now? Safe? Powerful? Fearful? Hurried? Bothered? Does any of that have to do with the heroes?

Settle on a single emotional state, then *feel* that emotion. Let that feeling come out as you speak and move.

Much can be communicated without words – what impression does the GC give that avoids eye contact versus one who fixes a player with a hard glare? Here’s another way to communicate without words – stand up and move around! Good Gamemasters aren’t bound to their chairs. When a stirring speech needs to be delivered, they stand up and address the group. Use your hands, lean with your body, cock your head, fold your arms, shiver, look over your shoulder, or pound the table. Hopefully not all at once, though.

Character Influence

Naturally the characters themselves will have a major influence on the GC for better or worse. The team itself impacts how a GC reacts to an offer, negotiation, or request for information. Here are four areas to consider, and one to avoid:

Attributes

How do the heroes appear to the GC from a purely visual standpoint? Some game systems incorporate the idea of attractiveness and charisma. That’s certainly part of the equation, but not nearly all of it.

Does the team appear heroic and virtuous or threatening and dangerous? Do they appear strange and unknown or familiar and trusted? Interesting and approachable or plain and distant? Weary and beaten or strong and vital? Professional or amateur? Lost or leading? Dirty or clean?

The first impressions that the GC forms of the group will be difficult to change, and will certainly influence the way the GC interacts with the team. Put yourself in the shoes of the GC and imagine what it would feel like to encounter the team, and let that feeling guide the interaction. Allow yourself to feel intimidated, or proud, or defensive, or happy and let the behaviors of the team amplify or change that initial reaction.

Behavior

After the first impression, how the team behaves towards the GC and others will have the next largest impact on the attitude of the GC. Are the heroes demanding and arrogant, or are they respectful and polite? The GC’s feelings should always reflect how they’re being treated.

Skills and Goals

The known, visible or stated skills and goals of the team will influence the GC. The more the known, visible or mentioned skills and goals of the

team align with the needs and goals of the GC, the more favorable the GC will behave towards the team, and vice-versa.

How would a merchant GC react to a team announcing they are about to gear up for an adventure versus hearing how they're down on their luck and in need of work? How would a sword for hire react to knowing that several more swords for hire are in town and competing for the same work?

Past Experience or Reputation

If the GC already knows the team, the GC's reaction will overwhelmingly be weighted based on the result of prior encounters.

The reputation of the heroes can also have an impact to the extent that the heroes *have* a reputation¹, and assuming the GC would reasonably have heard about them in advance.

Fright or star-struck adulation aren't the only responses to GCs encountering heroes with a reputation. A GC may cover up being impressed by the team by acting more aggressive. They may consider themselves better and openly challenge the team, seeing an opportunity to increase their own reputation. Or they may try to put themselves in the best possible light and attempt to curry favor.

Not Player Performance

One thing that should never be taken into account is the ability of the *player* to deliver a convincing role. In other words, a player who is a professional actor shouldn't ever have any better chance than a novice player of influencing a GC.

Creating Suspense

Players are held in suspense by revealing basic information while withholding details. So before divulging information to the players through a GC, ask yourself, "Is this an opportunity to create suspense? Would it be better to keep part of this information from the group right now?"

Say the party hires a street urchin to discreetly follow a suspicious character hanging around an orphanage they suspect is being misused by a Nemesis known as Bojunks McRay. The urchin, Redlack, returns to the party some time later. Consider this interchange between GM and players:

GM: (Neutral voice) "Redlack your spy reports back to you that the gang leader organizing the raids on the orphanage is none other than the terrible Bojunks McRay, who is at this moment holed up in his hideout at 104 Watercreek Lane."

Player: (OOC) "We go to 104 Watercreek Lane!"

¹ See page 220.

With this statement a great deal of information was simply plopped right into the group's hands with no effort or roleplaying required from the group. It is now a trivial thing to gear up, sneak up to the lair and move on with the story.

Instead of simply narrating, the GM should be flowing between Camera and Actor mode. Contrast the above interaction with the following scene:

GM: (in Camera voice) "Redlack your spy looks a little spooked. His hair is mussed, he's sweating and he looks like he's crawled through a lot of dirt."

Player: "Well, what have you got to report?"

GM: (Shifting to Actor mode, assuming the voice for Redlack) "I followed 'im all right, just as y'asked, all the way back to 'is stinkin' hole."

(The GM pauses here, as the players are sure to ask for more information.)

Player: "Can you tell us where that is?"

GM: (Staying in Actor mode) "Aye, 'e went into that scary old ware'ouse by the waterside."

Player: "Take us there!"

GM: (Changing to Camera voice) "Redlack looks nervous. He opens his mouth to say something but closes it, looking behind him as if he was being watched."

(Moving back into Camera mode allows the GM to give a non-verbal clue indicating there's more to the tale but it will have to be coaxed out, perhaps with some coin, artful cajoling, or some other approach.)

At this point the GM has created a real scene and given it a much greater sense of suspense. He's projected fear onto the party through the GC Redlack's appearance and nervousness.

The Gamemaster hasn't revealed the exact address. If the party doesn't wring it out of Redlack, they'll have to go looking themselves. This may alert Bojunks' flunkies. Redlack hasn't let the players know right up front that the warehouse is the lair of Bojunks himself. The players will have no idea how much Redlack knows and doesn't know, or how much they can trust him or his information. But they'll be compelled to investigate. Most importantly, the GM has involved the group in the moment and given them an opportunity to interact – to actually roleplay – instead of listening passively to a description.

The key to suspense is sharing just enough information, keeping the details unknown. Players often want to cut to the chase and ask direct

questions. How would the GC react to such direct questioning? Make the players guess as to the strength and intentions of GCs, details about locations, and other bits of information in the universe. What are the motives of the GC? If it is getting paid for information, the GC is likely to drag it out a bit. Deal with information, not underlying reasons. The player's job is to uncover or guess the reasons. Here are some underlying reasons that shouldn't be revealed easily:

- Why is that person following us? Who are they?
- What's behind that locked and barred door?
- Who is our Nemesis? Where is his hideout?

Always be liberal with opportunities to glean information but sparse with important story details. Let details come out as a direct result of the players' interest and actual roleplaying.

Actions have Reactions

How the heroes treat GCs should come back to them over the long run. A GC that is treated well might find a way to help the team later. A GC treated poorly might actively seek a way to undermine the party.

The GM should always be thinking of how each GC interaction could strengthen a friendship or harden an enemy as well as create new friends or foes.

Take the situation above. If the heroes offer money to Redlack, he may take it upon himself to try and dig up even more dirt. If they threaten Redlack, he's quite likely to alert Bojunks.²

Running Jokes

I love using running jokes in a campaign, and incorporating them is just a slight variation on what we do to breathe life into any other GC. All I do is find one strange or funny thing that a particular recurring GC does and play it up in every interaction with that GC. In one of my games the group hired on a temporary deck hand. I thought it might be funny if this GC was ultra-laid back and never got bothered by anything. The first high-stress interaction he had with the team was during a battle, and I really highlighted how he radioed the captain in an absolutely calm voice and said, "Captain, the engine is on fire." The players loved it, and it became a running joke - during every tense situation I'd try to have this GC deliver stressful information in a calm, deadpan tone. This GC quickly became a favorite and he stayed with the team for the entire campaign.

² This situation nicely sets up Redlack as a rumor-monger GC covered on page 139.

Things as GCs

Boats, planes, swords, guns, and vehicles are commonly ascribed as having personalities. A GM should consider imparting personalities to the important objects the players interact with.

For non-living things the GM doesn't have to go quite as far as Stormbringer the intelligent sword, or KITT the talking car. That rarely makes sense. But a sophisticated starship might have a voice-controlled interface or a powerful magic item might have a form of intelligence.

Even if the game doesn't have artificially intelligent systems or magically endowed personalities, the GM should make an effort to bestow important items with their own personality.

Start by encouraging the players to name things. A simple in-game trick is to have a GC inquire about a player's weapon and express surprise if they don't have a name for it. Ships need to be named and should always be referred to by name or at least by gender by the GM. The same should be done with other forms of transport or complex machinery.

Allow game events to help form the personality of the item. A weapon that consistently seems to do well against Orcs might rightly be named "Orcsplitter" and descriptions as the party readies for battle might include a mention of the weapon seeming to glitter with anticipation.

All vehicles have their own little quirks, noises or mechanical oddities that make for excellent descriptive opportunities. Anyone who has spent substantial time with a car, vessel, or aircraft knows this to be true.

Whenever an item is involved in the action, try to become that item for a moment. From that place breathe life into the item with a description. This adds a lot of richness to the game. I recommend actually putting together a GC Card for the major items. Keep track of their quirks just as you do any other GC.

Of the three modes, Acting mode is the one that seems to create performance anxiety among GMs. This is offset by the fact that Acting mode is far and away the most fun to play as GM. When the GM hams it up and really gets into character(s) the effect is magical. The players become more engaged, the amount of time they spend acting increases, and everyone has more fun.

Chapter 16

Gamemaster as Camera: Focusing on the Important

Camera

The most used GM function is the Camera. Whenever you describe *anything* in the game universe, how anything looks or the result of any action, you are in Camera mode. You are using words to focus attention on something in the same way a camera focuses on something in a motion picture.

This function is often incorrectly called *storytelling*. A storyteller tells a story to an audience who sits passively and listens. But in a roleplaying game, each player tells the story of their individual character.

Others might label the Camera function as *narration*, but that misses the mark as well. A narrator tells the story from a particular point of view. In other words, narrators always have an opinion. In roleplaying games the best Gamemasters provide no opinions in Camera mode and instead deliver chunks of information. The GM has ample opportunity to inject opinion through GCs in Actor mode. Each *player* determines the point of view of their character.

In most games, the majority of the GM's time is spent as the Camera. The challenge of this mode for the GM lies in deciding when and where to focus the camera. The power to focus the attention of the players on anything at all is an enormous responsibility.

Be highly aware of your Camera function during the game. Think of your descriptions as camera shots; visualize what the characters are seeing through their eyes as you speak. Looking at Camera mode in this way will help you describe what is important to the story, and avoid wasting time and words on the *unimportant*.

Focus on Conflict

On the first day of the first class anyone ever takes on writing or acting, the teacher inevitably says that conflict drives the story. There have been a handful of well-known stories without conflict. The play *Waiting for Godot* springs to mind, an exception that makes the rule; watching it will put any insomniac to sleep.

Think of any good book, play, movie, TV series, or puppet show you have enjoyed. The characters in the story are thrown into conflict – sometimes life threatening, sometimes spiritual or moral, but always interesting. The camera ignores anything that isn't creating conflict or driving the story.

Conflict can take many forms – it doesn't have to be a squad of heavily armed Imperial Marines facing the group down. Some of the most powerful forms of conflict are strictly internal. Making a tough decision is a conflict. Say, choosing between having to betray an old friend or see another friend put to death. Or finding a bunch of loot alone and deciding whether to share or how much to hold back from the rest of the party.

There must be conflict. The characters must be thrust into conflict at every opportunity.

This applies to more than just the Camera mode. Whatever form the GM chooses it to take, he must continually create conflict in the game. Even when the great battle is over and the gold pieces are being counted, there should always be some other worry. The way to do this is to constantly focus the camera on the next element of crisis.

Particularly in the early stages of a game the GM has to keep characters in turmoil. No matter how rich, powerful, and well-connected a character is, there is always a way to throw them into crisis.

Set the tone of the adventure early and keep up the pressure. If the tale is action-oriented, keep the action coming, or at least the threat of it. Instead of skipping a two-day hike to the dungeon, populate the wilderness with dangerous beasts that must be avoided or dealt with. Send wolves to raid or threaten their camp. Throw a gang of boisterous but unskilled bandits in the team's path. Focus on mystery and danger at every opportunity.

If you're running a horror-oriented game, keep up the creepiness and scary atmosphere. Here's an example: as the party begins exploring a haunted mansion have a different player notice something every couple of minutes. Say, "You may have heard something from around the corner. Something... moving." Or, "You notice the sound of a board creaking in the room you just left." Even if you know there isn't anything there, the players will be convinced something is lurking or following them. Then when they become convinced they are imagining things, bust out a real live nasty foe.

Camera Voice

Be conscious of your voice. How you speak always evokes an emotional response in your players. Many Gamemasters speak in a monotone and unknowingly cause players to feel bored, sleepy, or restless.

Instead, put as much emotion into descriptions as you can muster. Pay particular attention to describing any character's skill check with enthusiasm. Deliver short, evocative, and excitement-filled descriptions of every skill check during combat.

Avoid Reading Descriptions Out Loud

One of the greatest mistakes a Gamemaster can make is reading a prepared description out loud, word for word, right off the page.

Almost nobody can do this well, including professional actors. Actors memorize their lines for a reason! At best reading from a page will sound like a newscast. At worst, the players will be bored to tears. Players start tuning out when the Gamemaster uses more than a sentence or two to describe something.

Commercial adventures always have blocks of text that describe things: physical objects such as rooms and items, the way a GC looks, the social and political background of the area the adventure takes place in—and much, much more. This descriptive text should be read and internalized. In a similar way, some Gamemasters may write long descriptions for themselves as they prepare for a session.

Read long descriptions quickly to yourself first, then look up at the players, making eye contact and, using your own words, relay just enough information to create suspense. Maintain eye contact while talking to see if the players are confused or if they want to take action. Learn to read the expressions of your players and develop a keen sense for when a player wants to ask a question, confer with other players, take an action or more importantly, begins losing interest. Gamemasters reading off the page miss this critical non-verbal information from players.

When describing something, speak slowly and clearly, pausing often to let the players process the information or interact. Gesture and put emotion into the delivery. Always allow players to ask follow-up questions as you are speaking, even before finishing the entire description. If you wait, you will often find that the player has forgotten their question, and the game can get bogged down as the player struggles to remember.

The Cluebat

For every obstacle's Information Gathering stage there should be at least two methods of getting vital information to the players about the upcoming challenge. Sometimes despite the GM's best efforts players won't pick up on the clues.

From the Gamemaster's viewpoint, it is painfully obvious that there is a secret door in the room or that the characters are about to blunder into a dangerous situation. But the players can easily miss out on an important clue or make a mistake.

If players just aren't getting it some GMs might drop into Judge mode and request a skill check to help the players notice what they ought to have noticed already. This might consist of asking players to "make a listening roll." Bad idea. The GM may as well just tell the players what is

there because if they fail their roll, then what? The players have to pretend nothing is there and move on, knowing there was something interesting they should have known. That's an impossible situation, and cruel to boot. "Listening rolls" and the like actually encourage metagaming!

An even worse reflex is to stop gamemastering entirely, completely break suspension of disbelief and make a remark such as, "Guys, you missed something in here."

Up until quite recently I would use fake die rolls behind the GM screen to try and hint that an action might be possible. I'd roll the dice a couple of times and while staring at the result I would frown, shake my head, make a little secret grin, or pretend to make some important notes. However, this was far too vague to be of much use to players. Say the team hasn't figured out that they should search a room they are in for a secret door. Rolling the dice without speaking a word is just as likely to make them think someone is coming as remind them to search.

Anyway, none of these GM actions encourage roleplaying. If the Gamemaster has to resort to the above actions, the descriptions aren't getting through to the group.

Alas, the time has come to hit your players with the Cluebat.

The Cluebat resembles a technique used in particularly bad movies when the camera focuses way too long on an object to make sure everyone will notice—as when the criminal accidentally leaves a matchbook behind and the camera zooms in and sits on it for eight seconds. Hokey as it sounds, sometimes the GM has to bust out the Cluebat and swing it around or the story will stall.

Using the Cluebat is simple: just repeat the description. Stay in Camera mode and keep the focus on the clue.

If the players ignore the first whack of the Cluebat and try to move on, repeat the description and clue with slightly different words. Keep hitting them with the Cluebat until they get it. After doing this once—okay, sometimes it takes more than once—players pay better attention to GM descriptions.

Another technique for getting information to the party without breaking the flow of the game is to pass a note to a player as a suggestion, or perhaps roleplay a flashback—say of a mentor inviting the character to come to them if they need help. Or in a really stuck case introduce a different obstacle or segue into another adventure thread and in this way cause the information to "come to them" later.

Clobbering players with the Cluebat is a technique of last resort. If the Gamemaster has to swing the Cluebat often, he should polish up his Actor and Camera mode techniques.

An Example of Using the Cluebat

In this case, an important map is on the table, and the players know their characters should be looking for a map.

GM: “On the table next to the closed door you see an assortment of open books and parchments.”

Player: “I try the door; is it unlocked?”

GM: “You begin to pass by the open books and parchments on the table and move to the door.”

Player: “Well, is the door unlocked?”

GM: “As you reach for the door your eyes notice all the books and parchments on the table.”

Player: “What about the door?”

GM: “The one next to the table with all the books and parchments on it?”

Player: “Yeah the... hold on a second, did you say parchments? Like maps? I look around on the table for a map.”

Use Visual Details

The team’s adventures will take them to many places. What’s the best way for making each place the adventurers visit unique?

The technique for evoking a sense of place in the player’s minds is similar to the technique for bringing a GC to life. Focus on one or two visual details in your description of a settlement. Say, the city of sorcerers is filled with delicate glass towers. Contrast the whitewashed walls of a peaceful village with the garbage-strewn streets of a frontier outpost. Focus on a strange type of foreign tree, animals running wild in the streets, canals, a novel mode of transport, or unique architectural details like purple rooftops.

This works just as well for describing wilderness areas. You can imbue, say, a particular forest with a unique feel just by noting the tall trees with wispy, almost blue leaves, or the scattered outcroppings of white granite covered with orange moss.

Whenever you travel take note of the one or two unique features of the area. There is always something visually unique that sets one place apart from another.

One or two simple details are enough. In particular avoid lengthy or embellished descriptions unless you’re ready for spontaneous adventures.¹

¹ See page 255.

Avoid Exposition

Exposition is what happens when a GM imparts important information by narration. I'm not talking about descriptions, but about story.

Exposition is a terrible method for getting information to the players. Say the GM has set the group up to tangle with a gang of cruel Yakuza mobsters. A lazy GM would start the game off with a boring and forgettable narrative that describes how nasty and evil these mobsters are. Nobody is going to care.

Given the same situation, a great GM would have the characters witness first-hand a couple of particularly mean-spirited activities of these mobsters before the mobster adventure begins. They might see someone thrown from a distinctive moving vehicle that they later learn belongs to one of the Yakuza. Then later they might witness the final moments of a shakedown of a local merchant. After the thugs make their getaway the team learns that the merchant had a finger removed as a reminder of the event. Vivid, first person descriptions convey the most powerful emotions.

Exposition is terribly dull. Great GMs avoid any kind of exposition in their games. Instead, impart information through direct observation, or via other GCs.

Dead Air

Another mood-killer is *dead air*. The phrase comes from radio broadcasting. When was the last time you heard absolute silence on your local radio or TV station for longer than five seconds? There's a reason why radio broadcasters almost never allow dead air to happen – they know people will literally tune out.

In a game, dead air is just as bad. Do everything you can to avoid it. Novice Gamemasters often allow the players lots of time to make a decision in a critical situation. That's a bad idea. Dragging out decisions is boring for other players and ruins the suspension of disbelief.

Keeping an audience engaged requires constant stimulation. When the players become silent, focus the camera on a new conflict. Create reasons for the players to take immediate action rather than allow a fun-killing cloud of silence to descend on the players.

Novices also worry that if the Gamemaster doesn't take adequate time to make a good decision, the game will fall apart. But the truth is, if the Gamemaster has done his homework, making decisions will be quick and easy. And, in case the GM makes a mistake, the players in an exciting, fun game will be much more forgiving of a bad call than they would be in a boring game.

Don't Be a Drone

The opposite of dead air is talking too much. Many of us GMs rather like the sound of our own voices. We love the idea of being at the center of attention. Unfortunately, we can get carried away sometimes and ramble for a long time. The sound of a GM droning on and on puts players to sleep!

It is incredibly boring for players to hear the GM spend longer than about twenty seconds describing details. Excellent players will interrupt the GM and interact. Most players will just check out and think about other things, and you run the risk that players will miss a key clue.

Limit your speaking time in Camera mode to twenty seconds or less. Then pause and maintain eye contact with the players. Are they pondering a move? Do they need to consult with one another? Chances are you'll be hit with a question or need to wait for the group to confer. If no question, action, or discussion occurs after a few seconds, move back into Camera mode for up to twenty seconds more, repeating this cycle as long as you need to.

Describe GCs Simply

The best descriptions of a GC focus on a single detail. "He has this incredibly large nose." Or "Your eyes are immediately drawn to the intricately woven braids of her hair." Giving one clear detail makes it easier for players to remember each GC, even if the GC's name is forgotten. It gives them something to focus on and visualize in their minds.

Don't forget to use the GC Skeleton Sheet² or the Brute Squad Sheet³ to save time during the session.

Telling Friend from Foe

As Gamemaster it is easy to know who is the good guy and who is the bad guy. The players, on the other hand, only know about the universe through the Gamemaster. A lot of Gamemasters forget this and make the game unnecessarily frustrating for the players. For example, after several years of gamemastering I began experimenting with different GC techniques. I started to think that it would be more fun if I were less obvious about who the bad guys were among my GCs. I thought this would give more choice to the players, and that it would make things more interesting.

I couldn't have been more wrong. The players lost focus, questioned everything, and the sessions dragged.

² See page 260.

³ See page 261.

So at the next session I introduced an obvious bad guy and a stereotypical ally. What happened surprised me. The players became extremely interested in taking the bad guy down, and almost immediately gave their full trust to the ally. The game just flowed. It was amazing.

Once I discovered that players prefer clearly defined good guys and bad guys, I didn't hold back on making my bad guys really and truly the scum of the earth, and my good guys the most wholesome, wonderful human beings possible.

There are three ways to let the players know a GC is a friend or foe: by descriptions, reputation, or direct experience.

By Descriptions

Bad guys wear black. Good guys wear white.

Bad guys are ugly, often disfigured, but definitely ugly. Good guys are, well, good-looking.

Bad guys speak in a mean, gruff, or cold way. Good guys speak pleasantly.

Bad guys might even smell bad. Good guys don't stink.

Bad guy lairs are either entirely artificial—super high-tech, stark cold spaces with no plants—or dirty, smelly, and unkempt. Good guys live in clean, well-kept warm spaces.

By Reputation

Let the players learn about the GC's reputation. Before the players come face-to-face with a bad guy they should already know of the bad guy's cold-hearted cruelty, either by hearing from victimized GC's, coming upon the aftermath of his actions, or through direct experience with his underlings.

Say you believe the team would enjoy exploring an abandoned mine used by thugs. Roleplay a badly beaten peasant painfully limping past them. They probably won't be able to resist asking what happened, but in case they don't, have the peasant stop them and ask politely for water. In the discussion, he'll say he just got a wallop from the thugs. Fill in whatever sob story you want. The good guy obviously is the peasant, the bad guys obviously are the thugs.

By Direct Experience

Bad guys mistreat everyone: their henchmen, strangers, the environment, and particularly their enemies. Make a big show of their viciousness whenever you get the chance. Bad guys stop at nothing in pursuit of their goals; that's what makes them bad.

Good guys are generous, humble, wise, and kind. They take care of people and protect the downtrodden.

The Old Double-Cross has Lasting After-Effects

I once planned an elaborate unjustified double-crossing, where a once friendly stereotypical good ally turned against the party and became a bitter enemy.

I set up a GC bad guy and had him pretend he was a good guy over several sessions. I waited until the characters trusted him, and then suddenly the GC betrayed them.

Predictably, the characters stopped at nothing to have their revenge on the backstabbing GC. But another thing happened that I didn't predict. The characters stopped trusting *all* the GCs I put into the game for a long, long time afterwards. It became quite difficult to convince them that a GC was in fact a good guy. It got tiresome because the players would second-guess every single bit of information they received. Okay, they did that before, but they did it even more after the double-cross.

The players had stopped trusting *me* as the Gamemaster. It was hard to regain their trust. Once bitten, twice shy as the saying goes, and this is never more true than in a roleplaying game.

I'm not talking about having all the friendly GCs display blind devotion to the team. If the characters do something deserving of betrayal, by all means let it happen. I'm also not referring to introducing a shady GC with selective morals. Like, say, an old Nemesis. There is nothing wrong with that as long as the team is given enough description to understand they are dealing with someone untrustworthy.

All of the three modes are equally important, but Camera mode is where the tone and pace of the session are set. Your voice has a tremendous effect on players, so stay aware of your tone and energy level. Be an enthusiastic GM giving simple, relevant descriptions who stays focused on conflict.

Chapter 17

Combat and Its Consequences

Done properly, combat can be an edge-of-the-seat, vividly intense experience. Done poorly, combat can be an excruciating, boring slog through tables, charts and rulebooks.

Certainly most RPGs revolve around combat. However, the worst adventures rely entirely on one brawl after another with no story and no point other than an endless treadmill of experience and treasure.

That just doesn't make sense. Yes, adventures should be bigger than life but in each combat the opponents must have a sound basis for engagement.

Why and When Combat Makes Sense

Sooner or later in every RPG a fight is going to break out. I know of four reasons in a session to unleash a fight on the party. The players might call for it, things might be too boring, the group might be stuck in a rut, or it might result from a GC reaction.

Player Initiated

This is the most common form of combat. Player characters are quite likely to engage in combat as part of their goals.

There does need to be a reason for the fight. As a player character, being a bully is not one of them. A player character who is a bully is disqualified on the basis of not having a likeable character. Don't let it happen.

I once GM'ed a game where one of the players literally attacked every GC they met, and he wouldn't listen to my advice not to do so. It was really taking away from my and the other player's fun, so I stopped inviting him to the game.

And though bullies make for excellent GCs, even they have their reasons for fighting. Bullies might feel insecure and require a physical manifestation of their power they and others can see. More likely they are the victims of a larger bully and picking on the weak is their only outlet. It might even be their (only) way of showing affection.

Restoring Tension

It is perfectly legitimate to initiate combat if a game gets dull. When the players seem to be getting sleepy or their attention is flagging, by all means stir the pot by throwing some nasties at their characters.

Unsettling the Team

Sometimes the team can become too comfortable. One sign of this is over-preparation. It can be fairly tedious for a GM if the group regularly spends an hour discussing strategies and approaches, putting together itemized lists of things to buy, detailing secret signals and the like before going into battle. Having a plan is great, but taking an hour to put it together is excessive. If over-preparation is a common occurrence with the group, disrupt their preparations.

Use one of your instant obstacles or just conjure up something simple. You might have the party suddenly set upon by desperately hungry carnivorous animals, noticed by a local bully, or harassed by an underhanded law enforcer. Bottom line, do what you must to kick start some action.

If the team is moving too slowly, try to make the combat come as a direct result from their lack of speedy action.

Over the longer run, consider why the players are feeling so relaxed. The GM should be putting pressure on throughout the session. A too-comfortable team means the GM needs to ratchet up the urgency.

Introducing combat when the players become stymied, not knowing which way to turn, isn't helpful except as a delaying tactic. The next chapter deals with handling a stuck team.

GC Reactions

Making character actions have an impact in the world significantly enhances the believability (and fun) of the game.

A good GM takes the time to think through the possible repercussions of every character's actions, especially when the players do not. These consequences may start out as a side adventure but evolve into the center point of a campaign!

Even if the party isn't doing anything they perceive as harmful, they may have just trespassed in a sacred grove, accidentally insulted the local boss, or just caught the attention of a trigger-happy thug.

So when a GC, even a minor one, is attacked or threatened by the party, or even insulted in public, think about what the GC is going to do about it. How would they respond and what are they capable of? How large is the threat from the GCs? Then set up an obstacle and introduce it into the game.

GC Retribution

Character actions won't always make everyone in the game-world happy. If the party is running around bumping off, say, evil wizards, these wizards will have family, disciples, or other friends who might dedicate their lives to tracking the characters down and avenging their lost mentors.

GCs bent on revenge are a rich source of instant obstacles, so when a GC is slain, consider his friends. How long will it take for word of the death to get to them? Will they be able to link it to the party? Are any of them going to come after the party with vengeance in their hearts? If so, set up obstacles and use them whenever called for.

Placing Enemies

Each enemy the GM places in the world needs to have a reason for being there. There's nothing sillier than a dungeon filled with all sorts of wicked monsters in room after room. And I should know, I ran enough of these kinds of adventures in high school! Are we supposed to believe these monsters are just peacefully co-existing together, lying quietly in wait for the next party of hapless adventurers?

A GM should take the time to set up reasons for enemies to be where they are. Predators need prey, and plenty of it. They tend to require large amounts of area to rove across, and they are mighty unfriendly when another predator enters their hunting grounds.

This is not to say that large predators cannot share territory, just that the territory and relationship between predators needs to be thought out in advance. This predatory rule extends to humans as well. A human population can only support so much crime.

Morale and Suicide Attacks

Pretty much everything prefers to be alive. Few enjoy fighting and fewer still will fight to the death. To put themselves in harms way, people need a very good reason. Animals are likewise cautious about fighting. Yet many Gamemasters throw an endless series of foes at a party, foes that always seem to battle to the last man despite the odds.

Enemies should have a healthy sense of self-preservation. It doesn't make sense at all for a low-level poorly paid guard to put up a fight against a strong foe. They'd run for help, or just run.

Of course, there are a number of exceptions to this rule. The *Fighters to the Death Table* lists all of the ways I could think of that a person or animal would put their lives on the line.

When faced with overwhelming odds, or when the tide of battle turns, most enemies should run or beg for mercy instead of attacking on and on

like automatons. Of course, combat can end so quickly that there is no chance of escape, as in some of the classic samurai sword-fighting movies where the hero is surrounded by multiple foes whom he dispatches in seconds. Check out the *Zatoichi* series for a zillion examples of this.

Unless the circumstances are unusual, living things are rather more concerned with emerging from a fight fully intact and alive rather than throwing their lives away. Combat should reflect this fact.

Fighters to the Death Table	
1	Duellists
2	Warriors following Bushido or a similar warrior code
3	People who believe their sacrifice will save the lives of others
4	Some (but not all) people defending their homes
5	Anyone protecting a holy Artifact, sacred location or other culturally meaningful place
6	Bodyguards defending an attack on their principal
7	Minor undead or reanimated creatures such as zombies and skeletons (but not, say, Vampires)
8	People under the influence of certain types of drugs (notably PCP, some steroids)
9	Some warbots (Robots designed for combat) and remotely piloted vehicles
10	Creatures that have had the self-preservation centers in their brains removed
11	Parents/animals protecting their young
12	Cornered animals
13	Individuals filled with overwhelming loss, rage, sadness, grief or other strong emotions
14	People who are convinced that death will be better or the same as losing
15	Starving people or animals
16	Extremely mentally unstable people
17	People or animals infected with something rage-inducing (such as Rabies)
18	Young, uneducated people under the influence of a strong political or religious figure

Morale

Morale is a military term that refers to the willingness of a soldier to engage in life-or-death combat. Soldiers with high morale will not give up. Those with low morale will break and run. Morale isn't quite the

same thing as high spirits or confidence in victory. It's more a measure of willpower in the face of mortal peril.

If the game system doesn't say a thing about morale, the Gamemaster has to take it into account himself. It will be a lot more believable and fun for the players if the opponents, faced with overwhelming odds or certain defeat, break ranks and run away or surrender ignominiously.

This of course presents the party with new challenges: what to do with surrendered prisoners; how far to pursue fleeing foes as they may regroup and attack again and again; and even an ethical dilemma—is it okay to kill a fleeing foe? It also presents a challenge to the GM as the characters will inevitably press captured foes for information.

Foe Tactics

Tactics are the clever things that foes do to help defeat their enemies in combat. While there is no way to cover the field of tactics adequately in this book, Gamemasters do have to take tactics into account. Use three types of levels to represent the tactical ability of foes - green, seasoned, and uncanny.

Green

Green foes are inexperienced in combat; they are timid and obvious, telegraphing their intentions well before executing them. For example, a small number of drunken sailors will loudly proclaim their intent to fight, blustering and pushing their opponents before actually throwing punches or pulling swords. Average people, bandits, mobs, untrained militia, country sheriffs, and non-carnivorous animals fall into this category.

Pit Green foes against low level player characters. It isn't necessary to throw in any fancy tactics until the team is beating Green foes easily. It also breaks the suspension of disbelief when a low level mobster or a starving band of thieves pull off some incredibly complex surprise attack.

Seasoned

Seasoned foes are survivors of life-threatening combat. They do not show their fear unless severely demoralized. They hide their numbers, weapons and intent as long as possible before fighting breaks out. They use their surroundings to hide their numbers, protect them from harm, and gain advantage. Veterans, carnivores, hunters, mercenaries, and gladiators are Seasoned.

You'll throw Seasoned foes at mid-level characters once they have themselves seen some action.

Uncanny

Uncanny foes are masters of the art of war. They plan their attacks carefully, employing artful trickery and deceit - finding ways to appear weaker when they are strong, and strong when they are weak. Uncanny foes are rare indeed - Alexander the Great, Hannibal Barca, Salah ad Din, Attila the Hun, Sun Tsu, Miyamoto Musashi, Napoleon Bonaparte, and General Robert E. Lee are real-life examples.

Reserve the use of the Uncanny foe for the uber-Nemesis of high-level, powerful characters.

The Law

Unless there are unusual circumstances such as war, open combat is going to be illegal and will carry some serious repercussions, even if the team is doing the world a favor. Law enforcement characters are also going to have rules they will have to obey as well. Even James Bond has a boss. Whenever there is combat in any public place, incorporate the consequences into the game.

Hit Points

In combat the GM tracks the health, a.k.a. "hit points," of the characters and GCs. In some systems the GM may be the only one who knows the actual remaining hit points of any of the player characters at any given time.

Stay Mysterious

Long ago I read some sage advice – monsters do not wear t-shirts announcing to the player characters "My armor class is 2. I have 47 hit points." A Gamemaster should never describe other creatures using technical terms like hit points, armor class, levels, or hit dice. Players should never know specific technical information about a foe. Passing out technical details simply encourages metagaming. Instead, players should be informed by vague descriptions.

Similarly if your game system uses dice to resolve attacks, always give a single number required to successfully attack a foe. Never break down the modifiers used in combat for the players. This only breaks the suspension of disbelief and invites players to slow the action down by questioning the GM's judgment.

For example, say a player character is in a sword fight with an Orc. According to the rules in your system, against an ordinary Orc in well-lit conditions the player would need a 10 or better on a twenty-sided die to hit the Orc. Also according to the rules, the modifiers are as follows:

the combat is in semi-darkness (-2), the Orc has a magic ring giving him protection (-1), wears armor (-2), and is pretty good with a sword (-1), for a total of -6. Rather than roll off those numbers, you'd simply tell the player their character needs a 16 or better to hit the Orc.

Random Player Character Killing

The *threat* of character death supposedly brings a sense of reality to the game. If the players know their characters can die, it is widely said, a certain tension will be present that is difficult to create otherwise. Furthermore, the reasoning goes, if players know they cannot die they might take rash actions and treat the game world with disrespect.

I don't believe any of that. I do believe that the casual disregard many Gamemasters show for player character's lives is responsible for more ruined games than any other factor. Killing off characters without the permission of the player causes them to stop *caring*. Roleplaying dies. That's no good. A GM that lets player characters die randomly will *never* have any meaningful roleplaying in the game. It will not happen.

A successful RPG is all about establishing trust with the players. The players are literally trusting you, the GM, with the lives of their characters. Take that trust seriously and you'll have fantastic games.

Say the team begins their first battle against the first monster in the first session. And, as often happens, each of the players suffer a string of terrible die rolls while the GM has an outstanding series of rolls. Suddenly the rules say a player character should die. There are only two choices; follow the rules blindly and kill the PC or change something.

Gamemasters that would kill the PC in this case are hiding behind their own failure. And make no mistake about it; when a PC dies unwillingly, the GM is always responsible.

To see what I mean we'll grossly simplify combat rules and say that in any battle, the one with the lesser strength dies. Say the GM chooses the first foe for the team with a strength of 15, but of course doesn't tell the players the strength of the foe, just describes the foe as "formidable." The players, eager to prove their mettle, attack. One of the player characters has a strength of 14 and therefore dies. Obviously the responsibility for this lies with the GM.

It's the same with any system. Adding complexity just makes assessing foes harder for the GM, which increases the risk of accidental player character death. And to be fair, many RPG systems are so bogged down with complex rules, or have so many actions available that it is nearly impossible to assess whether or not a foe is properly matched to the team.

Now imagine you are in the position of making the call in the situation above. Which ruling will bring about more fun from the *player's* point of view? Clearly, randomly losing one's character is *not fun* for the player. (Nobody cares if they lose a one-dimensional "rolled up" character, but

we're not creating those.) Does the player now go home? Can they be expected to invest the same energy and enthusiasm in a new character, knowing that all their effort can be suddenly erased?

The correct thing to do when faced with random PC death is to take action to prevent the death before it happens.

Preventing Random Player Character Death

There are many methods at the Gamemaster's disposal to ensure that characters are kept alive without decreasing fun. If the PC deliberately assaults a superior force knowing they will die, that's a different story. This is specifically about a death the player does not approve of *in advance*. Eleven techniques for saving a player character from unnecessary death are ranked loosely in order of preference in the *Table of Life Savers*. Print this table out and tape it to the inside of your GM screen.

Table of Life Savers		
1	Quips	Adversary pauses to gloat, insult or grandstand
2	Negotiate	Foe pulls back and insists on the surrender of the team or makes other demands
3	Imprison	Enemy decides to imprison the PC
4	Flee	Foe retreats for no apparent reason (figure it out later if necessary)
5	Delay	Adversary perversely takes their time enjoying the PC's long, slow death
6	Sacrifice	Devoted GC sacrifices their life, saving the PC's life
7	Plot device	Use magic, a healing potion, a miracle, cloning, or another plot device to save or restore the PC's life
8	Block	GC stops the killing blow at the last moment
9	Rescue	Outside forces save the day
10	Luck point	The player (hopefully) remembers to use their luck point and re-roll the outcome
11	Fudge	Secretly alter the result

Preventing PC death doesn't mean making things easy. That's a violation of the *Rule of Fun*. Use PC failure as an opportunity to take precious things away: items, henchmen, status, something of value. Losing these things is quite painful to players. It's enough.

Number eight on the *Table of Life Savers*, the block, represents a major turning point for a GC. It's the RPG equivalent of Vader turning on the Emperor in *Return of the Jedi*. The GC's life will forever be changed by this action, so use it at the right moment.

Bringing Back the Dead

Living things tend to be tough. Many a creature has been left for dead only to return to full health, given enough time and care. Particularly in fantasy or ancient-oriented campaigns, a GC can appear dead to a character, even after a character checks thoroughly. If the body is left intact, the GC may well regain enough strength to crawl to safety. Make great dramatic use of this and have apparently slain GCs make repeat appearances now and then.

Mostly Dead

In our modern world we take for granted a lot of common knowledge. Everyone I have ever gamed with knows that, barring immediate medical care, if you don't have a heartbeat, you're dead. However, in a medieval or ancient campaign, people *didn't* know this, much less how to check for a heartbeat.

In the future we might have artificial hearts that use "always on" circulating pumps. In other words, you would be alive but you wouldn't have a pulse because your blood was constantly circulating. Man in the future may find it as hard to determine if someone is living as our ancestors!

The point is, there are a lot of ways to explain the reappearance of a GC the players thought was dead. And as we know from Mad Max in *The Princess Bride*, there's a big difference between *mostly* dead and all dead!

Chapter 18

Effect, Mood and Pacing

In this chapter we'll cover several related topics; how to reflect the (sometimes crazy) actions of the player characters in the game world, techniques for setting the mood of the game, and how to keep the game moving at the right pace. These all start with the right attitude.

The Changing Spirit of the Gamemaster

There are a set of certain attitudes, or spirits, I believe one needs to have as a Gamemaster. These attitudes change depending on the state of the game. (Forgive me if I get a little *Kung Fu* on you in this section.)

The Bamboo

Most of the time during the session I believe the Gamemaster should embody the spirit of the bamboo tree. That is, the GM should flex and bend the story, adapting to the changing demands and directions of the players, just as the bamboo reed flexes in the wind, Grasshopper.

In practice this means *listening* to the players and doing what is necessary to keep the game fun.

The Mountain

On rare occasions the GM ought to block the path of the characters – like an impassable mountain blocks the path of travelers wishing to get to the other side.

One such time would be when a character's action is unintentionally suicidal. In this case, start out with the Cluebat.

Say a player is preparing to attack in a situation you know is impossible to survive. Slow down the action and give the player another chance. For example:

GM: "As you reach for your blaster your eyes scan the area. You count fifteen, maybe twenty well-armed soldiers within range. At least ten of them have you clearly in their sights. Your hand is about halfway to your blaster as you take this in."

Don't make the player's mind up. Just present information that the player might not have fully considered.

If the player still continues, make the peril even more clear. For example:

GM: "Time seems to slow to a crawl. Ten assault rifle muzzles stare at you with the black, unblinking eyes of death, ready to unleash a withering blast that would certainly cut you to shreds before you could even draw your blaster."

Naturally, if the player still decided to draw at this point you should let it happen, having given fair warning that the action is likely to lead to the character being seriously wounded.

If the players involved actually proceed despite clear warning and being batted about with the Cluebat a few times, I'd probably severely incapacitate their characters rather than kill them off, unless the player and I had talked about a heroic death in advance.

Suicidal acts require strong GM intervention, but what about when a player's character is acting blatantly out of character? Only a poor GM would prevent actions simply because they aren't in line with a character's beliefs. If a player announces an action that is totally out of character it's best to dash off a quick note to them. For example:

In a note to the player: "A knight abandoning a damsel? Really?"

or

In a note to the player: "Just making sure you haven't forgotten about that million credit reward if you rescue the damsel."

If the player ignores the remark, announce the action with great fanfare:

GM: (in Camera voice) "Brave Sir Twinkletoes turns his back on the thug who insulted his mother, spit on his sword, and called his ancestors cretins. The thug begins dragging the damsel away, who is kicking and screaming "Help me! Help me!" The small crowd of onlookers that has been watching now begin to gossip amongst themselves. You can hear a few snatches of conversation..."

GM: (in GC voice) "I thought he was a knight but he's just a big yellow coward."

GM: (using another GC voice) "They'll throw him out of the order for sure."

And so on. This is great character development, as long as the GM makes note of the action and is sure to have negative consequences arise later.

The opposite is also true. If suddenly a selfish character decides to put their life on the line for another person, find out the reason why and make a big deal out of it.

In most cases though, let the party take an unexpected course of action. The GM's job is to keep it fun. If the players have changed their minds about something, roll with it.

There are a couple of other cases when blocking actions might be warranted. If you feel a player is metagaming (acting on information their character could never know) you might disallow the action.

If actions get nasty between players, it's best to call a halt to the game and let the players work through whatever the problem is out of the game space.

If the action is actually going to be destructive to the party or completely outrageous make the mountain appear and block the action. A classic example of destructive, disrespectful character actions would be attacking friendly GCs or even random strangers for no reason.

This is one time when you need to break the suspense of disbelief. State flatly that you're not going to allow the action "because it would ruin the game" or "I'm not interested in playing a game where that kind of thing happens" and move on. Again, this should be an action of last resort. If the players are doing this kind of thing there are likely serious problems that need to be fixed.

The River

Like the mountain, the river is a powerful force of nature. One cannot swim against its current. A river's course does not change. And like the mountain, a GM should almost never assume the spirit of the river. I once played in an email-based game with a GM who was always in the spirit of the river. He literally advanced the story at every opportunity and chose actions for our characters – including what the characters said! Within two game turns everyone had abandoned the game. Nobody likes being a pawn.

There's only one time to consider being the river, and that is when the group is at an impasse. Sometimes despite your best efforts the players will get stuck. The group has bought in to the obstacle presented and just can't seem to get to the next stage. Even then a GM must be careful.

First off, recognize this for what it is – a failure on the GM's part to present enough information to the party. The Gamemaster is solely responsible for giving the party all the information it needs to get from one stage to the next. If the players aren't connecting the dots, the Gamemaster hasn't supplied enough information. Understandably this usually occurs in the Information Gathering stage.

If this happens, the quickest way to break out of a logjam is to be the river and sweep the party into the next stage by introducing an event that requires a choice and moves the story forward.

This can be as subtle as a seemingly chance encounter with a GC that

has key information, as dramatic as a chase scene or come in the form of an outside force like a natural disaster.

Regardless of how you craft the event, always present the party with some choice, or at least the illusion of choice. Take the river metaphor literally. Suppose the party is in a desert and cannot seem to find the hidden tomb you were certain they'd have no trouble locating. Introduce a flash flood that catches the party unaware as they cross a wide formerly dry riverbed. As they are swept downstream, announce that they can swim to one side or another or just ride downstream. Whatever direction they choose drop them "fortuitously" at the entrance to the tomb.

Tread carefully here. There is a big difference between sweeping a blocked and confused party to the next stage of an obstacle and pushing a course of action on an unwilling group.

Always wait until it is clear that the players are out of ideas before adopting the spirit of the river. When sweeping them into the next phase always give them choices.

Cause and Effect

The actions or inactions of the characters must have an effect on the game world in later sessions. The characters should actively shape your campaigns.

Keep the effects the characters have upon the world reasonable. A GM should resist the urge to make a big deal out of low-power character actions while allowing for larger changes when powerful characters act.

Reputation is one way to reflect change. Think of reputation as a ripple spreading outward on the game world. The larger the action, the faster the ripple spreads, and the larger the effect.

What creates (or changes) reputation? A number of specific types are summarized in the *Reputation Events Table*. Consider any good actions; failed actions; actions that affect people, make people laugh, or remove or add evil. Basically things that people like to talk about.

As this talk spreads the heroes will come to be known for their exploits. If the character's actions come to the attention of some kind of organized news media (or a troubadour in a low-tech game) this adds force to the ripple, rapidly accelerating reputation and recognition, with both pleasant and unpleasant side effects.

When a reputation changing event happens, ask yourself with an eye towards introducing more conflict, "Who might benefit from this?" and, "Who will suffer?" A sudden influx of wealth to an area or person might bring on all manner of con artists and/or opportunities. A hard-won magic item will draw unexpected and unwelcome attention from thieves and potentially those with a claim, legitimate or otherwise, to the item. Likewise, when GCs undergo changes in fortune due to the actions of

the party, consider what effect that might have on the game world. A defeated Nemesis might create a power vacuum or introduce angry students, mentors, or family members hungry for vengeance.

The better a GM is at reflecting these effects the party has on the game world, the more fun the game will become.

Reputation Events Table	
1	Dramatic success
2	Blatant failure
3	Recognition by media or authorities
4	Public shaming (tar and feathering, stoning, etc)
5	Lawbreaking – suspected, implicated or caught
6	Being wanted by authorities
7	Capture
8	Escape from imprisonment
9	Conviction for crimes
10	Public loss (of a loved one, substantial holdings, etc)
11	Causing a change in another person’s status
12	Doing something entertaining, intentionally or not
13	Adding or removing evil to the world
14	Gossip or lies spread by enemies
15	Attaining or losing a position of authority
16	Being seen with a celebrity or political figure

Take It or Leave It

However the GM chooses to introduce an adventure seed he has to make it clear to the players that they can take it or leave it.

“Take it or leave it?!?” I can hear some GMs thinking. “You must be crazy! I just spent hours on this adventure and those players are going to play it and *like* it!”

Whoa there. A GM has to give the players the option to pass on *any* adventure. With the exception of the starting adventure, it’s a bad idea to try and force an adventure on the players.

No matter how good a GM is, if he only presents one adventure path, sooner or later the players aren’t going to want to travel that path. When that happens, the GM has to let it go and launch another.

The EBA¹ works well in this situation, but it may not even be needed if multiple adventures are available in every session. Being prepared sure beats being dismayed, embarrassed, and thrown into ignominious confu-

¹ See page 104.

sion if the players decline a particular adventure. Besides, the Gamemaster can always reintroduce the adventure that didn't fly at a later point when circumstances may be more favorable.

The Dice Set the Tone

With the exception of combat, skill checks are typically binary. In other words, the character either succeeds or fails. For many years I've used the outcome of a die roll in a non-binary fashion. That is, I use the result to enhance the *description* of the outcome.

How it works is this – let's say the rules dictate that a player must roll greater than 50 to achieve success. If they roll anywhere from 51-60 I consider that they barely achieved success and describe the action from that perspective. A roll of 91 or greater is a fantastic success and I embellish the description. In the same way, a roll of around 41-50 is a failure but just barely so, and a roll of 01-10 is described as a spectacular failure. Anything else is an average result.

Usually my descriptions add humor, tension or just make the action more vivid. However, the result might even carry some tangible consequences. A spectacular success or failure is an opportunity to hand out XP. A spectacular failure is definitely an opportunity to depower a character by causing equipment to be dropped, damaged, or lost, for example. I want to stress that this is not the same thing as a "critical failure" or "critical hit" employed by some systems. Those systems can inflict massive penalties on the player. I think this is a Bad Idea if it could lead to accidental character death.

This is the primary reason I prefer percentile rolls for skill checks; the wider range of numbers gives everyone a better sense of the strength of success or failure.

XP for Failure

In real life I have learned as much or more from failing at something as I have at succeeding. In recognition of this I award XP for an unsuccessful unique approach and for failing spectacularly. I award as many XP as I would for success. This encourages players to take risks and be open to learning as part of the fun!

Music

In movies and video games, music is often considered one of the most critical elements to success. There is a good reason for that – music is good at enhancing or even creating emotion. Always control the music during

the session. Try to keep the music relevant to the atmosphere you want to sustain. It isn't always possible, but try.

A polished (and time-consuming) example of controlling the music would involve categorizing various songs into different playlists on a computer or digital music player. Each playlist would be geared towards a certain kind of mood. If the setting were sci-fi, when the team walks into a bar you would roll out some kind of electronic jazz or lounge music. As they come upon the wreckage of a ship in deep space play ambient space-music. During combat play dramatic, high-energy songs. At a confrontational meeting with a Nemesis, play something dark. And so on; the goal always being to set the tone, enhance the illusion, and intensify the suspension of disbelief.

Pulling this kind of dynamic soundtrack off during a game takes practice and a good system. Avoid stopping the action for longer than five seconds when making a music change. Any longer and the GM risks breaking the game's tension.

Movie or game soundtracks shouldn't be played start to finish. Soundtracks cycle between many different moods. The last thing you want playing during an epic battle is the movie's one sad love song. Decide what emotion and mood you want to create and choose specific tracks to help convey that emotion, or don't play music at all.

Sometimes all you need is a few songs to get things going. Many years ago I was gamemastering a time-travel game and catapulted the players into the Wild West. I didn't have any music suitable for that time period at all, but I tuned the radio to a Country/Western station for a few minutes (until they played a commercial). It sounds hokey, and yes we laughed, but it really did set the tone.

It would be a major mistake to play slow-paced or ambient music for too long – I've done this in the past and it began to lull the players to sleep! Keep it upbeat.

Obstacle Flow

During prep the GM creates a number of obstacles. A few of the obstacles will be dependent on other obstacles,² but otherwise during the session the GM should choose the next obstacle based on what seems the most fun rather than following a predetermined order.

In the *Bandit Lair* adventure, the Barrow Monster is a key encounter. As often as possible during the session I will have GCs make mention of the creature so the team is aware and worried. But exactly *when* to spring the monster will depend on how it goes during the session. I might choose to spring the Barrow Monster on the party after leeches have weakened the strongest fighter, or perhaps have the strongest fighter save a weakened

² See page 102.

team member from certain death. There may be several encounters before it is defeated. If the team defeats the Barrow Monster more easily than I expected, I decide in the moment to make the first one a young Barrow Monster and then present a new more challenging obstacle: the great Momma Barrow Monster, twice as strong and seriously pissed off.

When to Advance the Story

Sometimes it may be necessary to advance time by a day, a week, or a month. That's fine.

However, before doing that, always consider two things.

One, are you missing out on a great game opportunity? Are you passing up excellent opportunities for adventure and action? Quickly scan your existing obstacles and even the *Table of Challenges* and see if something can be thrown in.

Two, check that you have verbal agreement from each player (with eye contact) that they are okay with time advancing. If a GM fails to get permission from all the players, he can get stuck with the dreaded time-machine syndrome.

Say the GM advances two weeks of sailing time, allowing the party to reach their island destination without getting a clear go-ahead from everyone. Say the team has forgotten to bring along enough fresh water. Upon discovering this a player might say, "Hey, you just advanced us all the way to the island! I would have built a water collection system out of old sail fabric!" Now the GM is under pressure to travel back in time so the team can take fair actions.

So when should the story be advanced by a certain amount of time?

When Players Run Out of Ideas, Options, and Actions

As GM try to avoid just sitting there passively for longer than fifteen seconds or so of dead air. If the players stop furiously scanning their character sheets, asking questions, discussing options, or taking action it is time to move things along.

Challenge the players and reintroduce conflict into the game. If it doesn't make sense in the story to have an immediate obstacle, advance time to the next place and period where an obstacle can be thrown at the party.

Say the characters are trapped in a cell and the players run out of ideas for breaking out. A dead silence falls on the group. At this point the GM can advance time until the next logical obstacle or event that makes sense. If that point is three days in game time from where the characters are, say something like, "Time begins to pass..." (pause for a moment), "...one hour turns into four..." (another pause – this one longer), "...four into twelve..." (again a pause of several seconds making sure the players are looking at

you), "...and before you know it three days have passed." Now make sure to glance significantly at each player. Repeat the statement "three days have passed" if you think someone missed it.

If anyone objects at that point you might roll back time and allow actions. Little is lost by going back at this point. However, once you begin introducing a new event, don't allow characters to travel back in time no matter how much the gang complains.

For Fairness Sake

Occasionally it makes sense to advance time when a character is unable to act. Say one character is seriously injured and has been taken to a safe place of healing, you might advance time so the injured character can heal and doesn't have to be left out of playing.

The key phrase here is "has been taken to a safe place of healing." The GM would never want to simply advance time allowing the characters to heal up if they were in the wilderness, deep in some dungeon, or floating in a ship somewhere. This is one of the most thrilling game moments for the players; when their characters are beaten up badly, deep in a dangerous place, and threatened by known and unknown dangers. So milk it!

Character Advancement

Characters have to improve or players will become bored. A well designed game system allows for rapid progression in the early stages that gradually becomes harder but still allows for regular advancement.

When I was designing the massively multiplayer roleplaying game *Underlight* I had the great honor of receiving some personal tips from some legends in the game industry. One of these heroes was Brian Moriarty who designed classic games like *Zork* and spent about a jillion hours as a Gamemaster in the online game *Gemstone III*, granddaddy to modern multiplayer roleplaying games. He taught me one of the golden rules: characters need to level up on the first play session. As the player gains in experience and power, the next level becomes more difficult to attain. If the game is entertaining and challenging enough, the player becomes highly invested in his character and is driven to attain ever higher levels.

Do the same in your face-to-face games. In the first session advance all of the characters. Aim for the next advancement no later than the third session, the third advancement no later than the fifth or sixth session. In a fast-paced game you might even advance characters each session.

Of course, some systems don't have explicit levels per se but allow for the advancement of skills. However the system works, see to it that the characters are improving steadily. If the game doesn't allow for advancement, as in some versions of the venerable *Traveller* roleplaying system, make adjustments to the system.

Chapter 19

Encouraging Roleplaying

Most novices take a while to warm up to roleplaying. Groups need to have a lot of mutual trust before players open up and really get into their roles. Building trust takes time, but the most critical time for encouraging roleplaying is in the beginning.

The first few hours of game time have a huge role in defining all future sessions. Make strong efforts, especially in the beginning—literally from the first words—to encourage, reinforce, and reward roleplaying. Players will thank you for it after the session.

So what can a GM do to set the stage for maximum roleplaying?

Lead by Example

The GM sets the example that everyone will follow. A GM boldly acting out the GCs in a game will inspire the players to follow suit. Likewise, if the GM takes the easy path and plays his GCs like cardboard cutouts—or worse yet, just stays in Camera mode and describes GC actions instead of acting them out—a dull, uninspired game results.

Be bold. Get into the roles *you* are playing.

It takes self-confidence to be the first one to act out a dramatic role. GMs put themselves out on a limb in front of friends. But acting out a role is contagious. Once the Gamemaster starts doing it everyone else will too.

IC/OOC Rules

Ideally, a player is almost always *In Character* (IC) during a session. Realistically though, players are going to drift from IC to being *Out Of Character* (OOC). This is quite common with players in the Action playing camp who tend to gravitate towards OOC behavior. And that's fine.

Per Rule #2, "Game or Don't," as long as people are talking about the game things are going in the right direction. But you can do a lot more to encourage IC play.

Inform the players that metagaming or off-topic chatter *may* be considered IC, meaning from the characters' mouths instead of the player. *May* is the key. Often you can just threaten it by asking in Judge voice, "Did your

character actually say that?" This technique is useful when, say, a certain player often shouts out combat advice to other players.

Judiciously applying this rule can have a large positive impact on the spirit of the game.

Actions Must Be IC

Players ought to roleplay their interactions instead of simply stating actions. The best way to encourage this is within the game, in Actor mode.

Here's an example:

Player: "I ask the bartender if he's heard about a dragon in the area."

GM: (Camera voice) "You walk up to the bar. The bartender is standing right in front of you, polishing a glass. He says... "

GM: (Actor mode with Bartender voice) "What kin I do fer ye?"

Player: "I ask him about a dragon in the area."

GM: (Camera voice) "The bartender looks at you quizzically..."

GM: (Actor mode with Bartender voice, and with an extremely puzzled expression) "Eh? Him? Who? Are ye talkin to me?"

Player: "Well I ask him if he's heard about a dragon nearby."

GM: (Camera voice) "Do you take a seat or stand? He's right in front of you."

Player: "I sit down, get his attention and ask him if he knows about any dragons!"

GM: (Camera voice) "You take a seat on a wobbly wooden stool..."

GM: (Judge voice, almost a whisper) "... but you have to actually ask him as your character Arlon, not as Joe talking to me, the Gamemaster."

Player: "Oh." (Arlon's voice) "Excuse me sir, have you heard of any dragons in these parts?"

GM: (Actor mode, assuming Bartender voice) "Dragons? Dragons ye say? Aye..."

No matter how long it takes, don't let them get away with avoiding GC interaction. In this case, act out the part of the bartender as if the player was in fact playing IC. How would the bartender respond if someone came up and said exactly that to him?

Another technique to nudge the player toward IC play is to deflect the question. In the above example, a choice of sitting or standing was combined with another gentle reminder to engage IC.

If the player persists, you might have to slip into Judge mode and chide them gently.¹ Don't give up.

As the game goes on allow players to communicate indirectly on occasion, but Gamemasters mustn't let this become habit. Once this OOC mentality sets in it takes a lot of work to correct. Oddly enough, OOC mentality can be a particularly common occurrence with players who consider themselves to be expert roleplayers.

You might also set out a major XP bounty for staying IC throughout the entire session. I like to set the IC reward at 50%. That is a *major* bonus. If a player goes OOC slip into Judge mode and give that player a single gentle warning that they are OOC and will lose out on the bonus if they continue. If it happens again slip into Judge mode and inform them they have lost out on the bonus and if they continue you will apply a negative modifier on future XP.

Examples of OOC versus IC

OOC: "I ask the bartender if he's heard of the Grey Goblins."

IC: "Arlon steps up and signals the bartender for another drink. 'Hey there, have you ever heard of the Grey Goblins?' he says, with a coin in his hand."

—

OOC: "I try to negotiate with the arms dealer."

IC: "When I hear the price I say, 'Is that the best you can do?,' and make a move as if to leave."

—

OOC: "I'm not moving my character into the line of fire . . . I'll stay put behind the car."

IC: "I turn to Shewel, point toward the snipers and say, 'What are you crazy? I'm not going anywhere,' as I huddle behind the car's tire."

How to Dole Out Common Knowledge

One problem all players face is their lack of knowledge about the game world. During prep we write down common knowledge – things that should be known by nearly every GC and potentially even the characters in the party. Since the players do not possess this knowledge, here are four techniques for imparting this information.

¹ In rare cases you may have to throw a lightning bolt. See page 240 for a discussion on that.

On Paper

The Gamemaster can provide common knowledge to the players in the form of a handout at the start of a session. This is often done at roleplaying conventions where time is short and people who don't even know each other have only a minute or two to prepare before adventuring together.

Unfortunately most paper handouts involve big blocks of text that are hard to read and harder to remember. Don't write a story. Remember that the players have come to play, not read. If you plan on using this method, keep the information to short bullet points no longer than a sentence. That way, players will be able to scan the list of bullet points when stuck. Leave lots of white space so players can add their own notes, hunches, and observations. Keep the length to a single sheet of paper, and focus only on what you've prepped for in the session.

I used to include false clues and extra GCs in my handouts because I felt that the adventure would be too easy to "solve" if I didn't. But inevitably, the group would spend massive amounts of time pursuing the false clues and interacting with GCs that were not connected to the Adventure Seed. They wouldn't let go because they were expecting to find something. The more time they spent, the more frustrated we all became. The game could get so stuck that I'd have to break the players' suspension of disbelief and tell them it was a dead end OOC.

GM's don't need to add false clues to the game; the players will add them on their own! When that happens I roll an adventure on the fly² if the wild goose chase looks like fun.

By Exposition

During the game, with small bits of information that can be conveyed in a single sentence or two, you can simply assume your natural, neutral voice and explain the common knowledge. This is the fastest method of imparting the information, but should only be used for simple, quick, observations. For example "You all recognize the uniform of a royal guardsman."

By GC

As the party interacts with GCs, sprinkle in bits and pieces of common knowledge. When the players hear it from a GC the information becomes more real – it becomes something they can interact with, question and take ownership of. In many cases the group will consider information received in this fashion suspect because it doesn't come from a trusted source. That's fine. Sometimes you'll have to mention the same information from different sources in order for the players to believe it. That makes for satisfying detective work.

² See page 255.

By Player Observation or Foreknowledge

If information is noticed by a single player or is based on knowledge a player character should know but the player does not, quickly jot down the information and hand it to the player or take them aside for no more than two minutes and give them a quick briefing. Then let the *player* decide how and when to reveal what they know or have observed to the party.

Say a player is playing the role of a starship pilot and hasn't the faintest idea about preflighting a ship. You'd simply say to the player privately, "As a pilot you know there are serious risks involved with just walking aboard a ship and taking off immediately. You'd normally spend as much as thirty minutes doing a careful check of the ship's systems – less time spent means more risk."

This is the most powerful form of imparting common knowledge but it does have the potential to backfire if a player decides to hoard the information, forgets the information, or minimizes its importance. Be ready to remind the player and keep a backup GC on hand if it becomes necessary to inform someone else in the group.

Refer to Character Sheets

Keep copies of each character sheet close by and refer to them frequently. During the game you may need to remind players about their characters' history, shortcomings or other details such as something from the Rights and Wrongs Sheet. This usually happens with novice players or during the first few sessions of a new game.

Avoid doing this out loud in front of other players, as it breaks the mood. It may even have the opposite effect of what you intend, since some people might take your reminder as some kind of reprimand or order and feel compelled to act contrary. A better technique is to discreetly and politely write a short note to the player and let them decide how they want to handle the situation.

Reflect Changed Behavior

If the player continues playing their character substantially outside of the details on their character sheet, those changes need to be reflected in the game universe. You can have an observant GC who knows the player's character make a remark, or use Camera mode to focus on the change, saying something like, "You all notice that Superhero Snarko, protector of the weak, is deliberately ignoring the mugging going on down the street." Changes in a character's behavior should have an impact.

It's easy to perceive this change as breaking character, as somehow being wrong. However, what may actually be happening is some interesting character development. There isn't anything wrong with playing a completely

different role with a character than is spelled out on the character sheet as long as the GCs in the world react appropriately to the change.

Say a player worked up a pious, non-materialistic monk but during play he becomes obsessed with treasure. Look for ways to introduce more conflict – perhaps another monk or a superior from the same order accidentally bumps into the character loaded down with loot or sporting expensive new gear. When GCs react believably to character developments, the entire game becomes more believable and fun.

Having a character change is something to strive for – as long as the decision is made consciously by the player and the change is reflected in the game world.

Avoid Player Skill Checks

If a *character* doesn't have enough skill to perform a task the GM is right in making that task hard or even impossible to accomplish. That's obvious.

Player skill checks are different. These happen when a GM penalizes the *player* for failing to have appropriate real-life skills to match their character's game skills.

Say a player's character is skilled in intimidation, yet the player isn't particularly good at acting out an intimidating person. Perhaps the player has a squeaky voice or is soft spoken. The GM should never base success on the *player's* ability to intimidate the *GM*. This may seem silly, but it can be hard not to let a bias slowly creep into a GM's judgment that unfairly affects the outcome of actions.

Penalizing players because they cannot deliver convincing roles does not encourage roleplaying, it shuts players down.

No Firehosing

When people brainstorm ideas, it is like building a bonfire. Everyone's creativity is a huge pile of wood. Each suggestion is a little spark. Eventually you have a roaring blaze of ideas—unless someone firehoses it out.

A firehoser says "No, that'll never work," or "That's a bad idea." They kill brainstorming sessions. This negativity is like a huge torrent of cold water washing over the bonfire. Brainstorming isn't about coming up with good ideas, it is about coming up with *ideas*. Afterwards everyone can sort out what's good or bad.

It is possible to firehose roleplaying too. All it takes is allowing one person to make fun of or criticize how someone plays, and the game is dead. It's that simple.

If this happens take the firehoser aside and tell him privately that he is making people feel bad because of his comments. Make sure he under-

stands the impact of his actions and how it will kill the game if he does not stop. If he continues his unfriendly behavior, stop inviting him to the game. Some people don't play well with others.

Roleplaying Bonuses

Basic game theory tells us that the reward system or victory conditions of a game will have a large influence on the actions that the players will take. For example, as a veteran of an embarrassingly large number of multiplayer computer games, I noticed a common behavior – more powerful players tended to beat up on weaker players. This behavior is *created* by the game system because players are rewarded for defeating other players. Of course more powerful players are going to bully weaker players in those kinds of games! So when I designed the MMO *Underlight* I set out to change that behavior. Players got a small reward for defeating other players but a much, much larger reward for *helping* players weaker than themselves. It worked. In *Underlight* the powerful players were always on the lookout for weaker ones – so they could gain power faster. The kinds of player vs. player issues plaguing most massively multiplayer RPGs simply weren't an issue for us. The game system dictates the behavior of the players.

In the same way, giving explicit rewards for roleplaying will cause players to roleplay more. Unfortunately, many game systems don't have roleplaying rewards, which is a constant source of personal frustration for me. If you're using one of those systems and really want to encourage roleplaying you have to improve the system.

The counterargument to rewarding roleplaying sounds like this – if you set up rewards for roleplaying you will encourage overly theatrical play, outrageous risk-taking, or downright silly actions in the name, but not the spirit, of roleplaying. My counter-counterargument is, that actually sounds like a lot of fun!

When the players feel no attachment to their characters, or don't actually want to play a roleplaying game things won't be fun. But you shouldn't have those issues if you choose your players wisely, take the time to create great characters, and keep the game focused on character goals. Reward the players when they roleplay.

Timing when to give out the bonus is a matter of taste, but write down the bonus right away. If there is a lull in the action you might jump into Judge mode and mention the bonus, or wait until the session ends. It all depends on preference and style.

The best way I've found to deliver bonuses to players is to give them as a percentage multiplier on all the XP earned in a given session. That way you don't have to worry about adjusting specific bonuses as the characters grow more powerful. The *XP Bonus Table* is what I use.

At the beginning of each session each player starts out with no percentage points. During the session I make a note of the number of percentage points earned next to each player's name on the XP Tally Sheet³ every time I think they've done a particularly good roleplay. At the end of the session I total up the percentage points and multiply the percentage against the traditional XP earned and award that as a bonus. So if Player A had a total of one hundred and twenty percentage points on their XP Tally Sheet they would get a 120% bonus on XP earned that session.

XP Bonus Table	
Clever use of trait or quirk	1%
Bringing up back story	5%
Roleplaying a weakness	10%
Using rights and wrongs in gameplay	10%
Showing up in costume	10%
Exceptional RP	25%
Staying IC for the entire session	50%

You might consider taping a sheet of paper listing the XP bonuses to the outside of the GM screen so the players can see it. Then make sure to give out the rewards.

Be careful to judge each player individually, not against the others. It's possible that some players will feel intimidated by a particularly talented player's roleplaying and if a more experienced or talented roleplayer gets more rewards despite the other players genuinely trying, those players getting less will become frustrated and angry about the lack of equity. But as long as you are fair about it, don't feel bad if one player earns substantially larger bonuses than others. This should serve to encourage the others to try harder.

You might also decide to make the bonus apply to everyone on the team if individual bonuses are causing friction among players.

No one is born a great roleplayer, but anyone can become great. All it takes is leadership from the GM, encouragement, some patience, and the right rewards.

³ See page 166.

Chapter 20

Solutions to In-Game Problems

Splitting the Party

Sooner or later one or several players will want to separate their characters from the main party. The players may decide to split up to pursue two goals simultaneously, events might lead to an accidental separation, or it might be the fault of the GM.

I say fault because splitting the party should be avoided if at all possible. It forces the Gamemaster to make a cascading series of tough choices, none of which have good results. Sometimes, however, there is no way around it. So how should the GM handle it?

A GM's first tough decision is whether to physically split the players. If the GM decides to keep the players in the same room it is going to be difficult to keep the players from metagaming. Obviously the players will overhear what is going on with the other characters. Even an expert player cannot be expected to forget what they have overheard.

If, on the other hand, the GM does move the group to separate areas, the group that isn't actively playing is going to get bored fast. Their suspension of disbelief is going to be shattered as they shift to other amusements until their turn arrives. The more time they spend separated from the action of the game the harder it becomes to resume intense play.

The next challenge is figuring out a fair and reasonable way to stop play with one group and start with the other. The longer a Gamemaster waits the more bored the inactive group becomes.

If the group is considering splitting themselves, you might wait until they've reached consensus and then make an out of character joke – "What, you're thinking of splitting up? Don't you people *ever* watch horror movies?" Give them a wicked grin, pick up your dice and start shaking them in a joking, semi-threatening display.

If the party splits anyway, it's tempting to call for a break and talk about the negatives of splitting parties, or to ask that the group reconsider. That can work. It breaks suspension of disbelief but that's going to happen to a greater degree anyway with a split party.

If you believe the split is going to lead to a boring time, you might quickly devise an obstacle that one half of the party must overcome that coincidentally requires a missing party member in order to succeed. This isn't the best solution, as it encourages a poor GM style: one of controlling

player actions. It also frequently requires metagaming to pull the team back together, something no GM should encourage.

The best you can manage is what I call a micro-split.

The Micro-split

In some cases it does make sense to quickly split one or more people from the main group. This happened to me in a game I was playing while writing this book. In the game our characters were crossing an underground river by walking along the exposed tops of underwater columns, jumping from one column to the next, and about halfway across the Gamemaster told the entire party that we heard a loud sploosh behind us and, turning to face it, we saw the rearmost person in our party disappearing under the water! He took the player whose character had disappeared aside, and described the situation to her: she had been pulled beneath the water by tentacles and was descending rapidly. Before waiting too long, the GM returned and gave us some more information and an opportunity to act. He kept moving quickly back and forth between us until we were rejoined. It took no more than five or ten minutes total, and during the minute or two of dead time between actions the players were thinking furiously about their next actions.

By keeping the party split only during combat or intense action, and keeping the total time everyone is split under ten minutes, the Gamemaster kept the action up and substantially enhanced the conflict, tension, and fun in the game.

Wandering Players

The wandering player is a different situation than a group-agreed party split. This player deliberately and frequently goes solo, separating from the rest of the team. The GM is forced to create a mini-solo adventure for the wanderer while the rest of the players turn into spectators.

I believe the reason most players split off on their own is because they feel they are not getting enough of the camera focus from the GM. It's true that some players will never have enough of the focus - I like to call these people "Gamemasters." But seriously, the player might not be getting their fair share of the spotlight.

The most common manifestation of the wandering player is with a sneaky character like a thief or rogue. Since it is part of their nature to sneak off and tiptoe around, the wandering player tends to gravitate towards this type of character. It affords them an excellent cover story they can use to unfairly hijack the game away from the other players.

There is nothing wrong with a rogue sneaking off to scout out a location a short distance away—if they return quickly and don't get involved in their own extensive adventures along the way. It's when the player starts

pursuing their own private agenda that the GM has to step in and shift the camera focus back to the group at large. In my experience, as soon as the player begins diverting from the stated team goal the problem begins.

A player who wanders should be a wake-up call to reevaluate the challenges given to this character. Does the character have enough things to do that mesh with the team's goals?

If you have taken steps to balance the focus and it still isn't helping, take stronger action. The GM is the representative of *all* the players. The players will be looking to the Gamemaster to put a stop to this unreasonable behavior. If a GM lets wandering players get away with this kind of behavior it ruins the game for everyone else.

There are several solutions to this kind of activity, and they all revolve around getting wandering players in over their heads. Don't bother taking the player aside and talking with them. Simply make all of their attempts at side adventures end in disaster. Be the Mountain. Here are a few techniques.

Team Obstacles

The best way to put an end to wandering players is to constantly block their path with an obstacle that cannot be overcome without help from another team member. The character encounters a tremendously heavy stone blocking the path, magical barriers, complex locks, or discovers (but does not alert) a heavily armed guard – anything the wandering player's character cannot possibly get past alone.

The Chase

Another solution is to have the wandering player's character stumble upon an overwhelming force that starts chasing the character back towards the party. This nicely reinforces the need for keeping with the team and adds some action to the session.

Broken or Lost Items

Losing things is painful. If the wanderer keeps breaking or losing cherished items along the way this will also reinforce the need to stick with the group. Even better if the player character has to plead with the team to help him recover the item.

If the game has magic, it's a simple thing to create a trap that holds magic items. Perhaps they can only be removed with the help of the team, perhaps they are lost forever. If the game has no magic the GM can simply present an obstacle that requires the use of an item with a high probability it will be broken, or present a deft thief that snatches a PC's item.

Curses

If you've got magic in the game, let wandering players stumble across cursed items or themselves be cursed, say by opening a tomb. Balance the severity and duration of the curse with the frequency that the player wanders.

The Trap

A final solution would be to physically trap the wandering player in a Holding Device. Take them out of the action until the party finds them. Giant spider webs, oubliettes, sleeping gas, force fields, capture – all of these methods will deter the wanderer because they accomplish the *opposite* of what the wanderer desires. Being forced to sit on the sidelines waiting for assistance is a strong deterrent.

Avoid Creating Failure for the Entire Group

A GM might have the actions of the wandering player cause the current objective to fail, leading to negative consequences for the entire team. This will exert strong peer pressure on the player, but perversely might actually lead to more wanderings as this throws more attention upon the player. It's also unfair to punish the entire team, and difficult on the GM who may have to conjure up new obstacles.

Bad Calls

No matter how amazing the Gamemaster is, everyone eventually makes a bad call. Sometimes a GM's ruling might have unintended consequences, or it may just be plain wrong.

In the big picture, a bad call now and then isn't nearly as disruptive as an extended haggling session over the merits of the call, the rules or reality.

When a player complains about or challenges a game ruling, it's the GM's duty to decide if it is worth breaking the suspension of disbelief further by halting gameplay to listen to their reasoning and possibly change the ruling.

If a PC's or GC's life is on the line the Gamemaster should always stop to consider the point. For a minor action or encounter it's usually better to move on.

Let's talk about a few ways to handle minor complaints without haggling.

Play the Complaint Out IC

Good Gamemasters are always thinking about the story and where it is going. If you're feeling confident about your decision, turn the complaint into a character action.

In other words, act as if the character, not the player, has made the complaint. Let's imagine that the person playing Arlon is complaining frequently OOC. Here are a few things you might respond with in Camera voice:

"Arlon stops for a moment and reflects that life doesn't always make sense."

"Arlon offers up a long and impressive string of profanities that echo off the cavern walls. As the echoes die off you aren't sure, but you think you hear some kind of frightening, deep-throated growl in the distance."

"Arlon viciously kicks a large rock and foully curses his luck."

"It's at times like this that Arlon always seems to think back on the teachings of his mentor who was fond of saying, *that's the way the cookie crumbles.*"

If the player persists and breaks character after this, a GM might continue on in that vein, or respond out of character quickly and just charge ahead with the game.

"Duly noted. Moving along..."

"My decision is final."

Sometimes a little humor is in order:

"Oh, you want some more of that?" (Pick the dice up as you speak.)

Use your best Darth Vader voice to say, "Pray I don't alter the deal further."

After a couple of game sessions the players will come to trust the GM and this should become less of an issue. If a player *still* keeps challenging the GM on call after call, the Gamemaster may have a *rules lawyer* to cope with.

The Rules Lawyer

A rules lawyer is a person who questions the GM's judgment, often pointing to pages in a game manual to back up his point. Dealing with this type of person is always hard, because they often argue for the sake of argument. They would rather argue than play!

Some rules lawyers can be quite convincing and articulate. They may be able to beat the GM in a debate hands-down, be physically intimidating,

or be the GM's significant other. And thinking about it, I'm not sure which of those is a more formidable opponent!

Incessant debates destroy a game. The other players are there to have fun roleplaying, not listen to boring arguments. The players will look to the GM to correct this problem, so take strong and swift action to save the game.

First, consider whether the player in question is being entertained. Putting more conflict in their character's path is often all it takes. However, the true rules lawyer won't stop even in the heat of conflict.

If their behavior cannot be stopped by increasing their time in the spotlight, take the following actions immediately: stop all action in the game, even turn off the music to emphasize the point, get everyone's attention and point out that your judgment is final and that this incessant questioning is ruining the game. Remind everyone that the game isn't about winning every conflict, but about creating a story. I've yet to come across an RPG system without a rule stating that the Gamemaster's decision is final. Point to that, get the rules lawyer to agree that your decision is final, and move on. Don't penalize the player, just continue on with play.

If the lawyering keeps cropping up, start throwing lightning bolts. If even that doesn't work, don't invite that player to the next session.

Throwing a Lightning Bolt

Sometimes the GM just has to wield supreme authority. I'm fond of the phrase "Walk softly but carry a big stick."

From time to time, players are going to do irritating, distracting things. This is just part of the game. Making jokes and breaking character happens.

In rare cases though—say a rules lawyer who won't quit or a player who never stays in character—the GM might have to throw a lightning bolt.

I used to wait too long to throw a bolt. When I was a novice I'd never throw bolts and would eventually get so mad that I'd do something like let rocks fall on the entire party, killing everyone instantly. Now I act way before it becomes an emotional drain on me or any of the other players.

Throw Bolts IC

A novice Gamemaster uses Judge mode in a futile attempt to change OOC behavior. At best, this breaks suspension of disbelief even further. At worst, it simply encourages the offending player. The GM can often end up looking like the bad guy in this situation, perceived as a disciplinarian instead of being on the side of the players.

Unless you have a Wandering Player, the way to get back on track is to stay as Actor or Camera and use the game to defend itself. Perhaps a player constantly talks over the other players, telling rude jokes. If the

party is walking through a town, take the player's rude joke as a character action and have a prudish nobleman and his nine-year old niece overhear the tasteless joke while passing by. The nobleman becomes infuriated, possibly bringing down local law enforcement, or challenging the offending character to a duel, or perhaps demanding a bribe in order to resolve the situation.

Frequently players make a habit of shouting advice at other players during combat. This is a particularly irritating form of metagaming, and one that the recipients often resent. Again, simply make the comment a character action. All the bad guys hear the advice, take appropriate defensive action nullifying the attack, and focus their attention on the shouting player who they'll naturally perceive as the leader. Another effective technique is to have the shouting character attract enemy reinforcements. Any of these techniques neatly restores the suspension of disbelief, increases the fun of the game, and keeps players mindful of OOC actions.¹

Retroactive Continuity

Sometimes, despite the best record keeping and outstanding memories, Gamemasters accidentally contradict prior game history. The GM could forget the existence of a town, accidentally change the allegiance of a GC, any of a million things could happen. In various kinds of media this is called retroactive continuity or retcon.

Gamemasters should avoid retcon because it does tend to break the suspension of disbelief. However, if you GM long enough it'll happen. If the GM is lucky the retcon won't be noticed by the players. If they do notice usually this is no big deal, just do what seems best and move on. At the end of the day it is worse to stop and haggle over history.

Minimizing Metagaming

Certainly, most players seek to game the system to their advantage. That's normal. Metagaming is taking that strategy too far.

Metagaming happens when a player uses information their character could never know in a game. This is common when you combine popular game systems with players who have spent a lot of time using the system. Players often do this unintentionally. An obvious example would be breaking out the exact combination of spells or weapons needed to kill a specific unusual monster the character has never encountered. Often this is accompanied by shouting out the proper technique to any novices in the

¹ The section on IC/OOC on page 227 has some more examples for minimizing OOC play.

group, "Don't stand in the water, those Fragglefisters have electric tentacles! And use blunt weapons or they'll regenerate!"

Novice GMs often aren't even aware of metagaming. Poor GMs encourage it. Good GMs keep metagaming out altogether.

One pointless strategy employed by game designers and novice GMs to minimize metagaming is to restrict access to the rules of the game. This is useless if the players already own or know the system before the game begins. A determined player can just buy the system. Don't bother.

There are far more creative solutions.

The Power of a Name

An easy way to eliminate one kind of metagaming is simply to rename the creatures and items found in the game's rulebooks. Use the same stats and descriptions but change what things are called. Few players will catch on that the Grelbacks are simply Orcs with a new name.

Likewise when a player is eligible for a new spell or power, don't always just hand over the rulebook to them. Change the names of spells and powers too, and perhaps fiddle with some of the details. Instead of *Magic Missile* the character learns *Firebolt*. Doing this brings back a sense of mystery and wonder into a game that old hands have forgotten (and unconsciously crave).

Use Vague Descriptions Instead of Names

Often the way an action is described will alert the players to an appropriate defensive strategy. A GM can give away far too much information in his descriptions, like "The Orc leader pulls a Molotov cocktail from his belt." Instead, a crafty GM will describe how the enemy is "fiddling with a bottle" to keep the players guessing whether the liquid is flammable, magical, or simply a tasty beverage.

Cheaters

In-Character Cheating versus Player Cheating

If a character cheats in the game, of course that's up to the player. A player might have a character with expertise in poker and skill at underhanded card tricks. If the player's character used those tricks to cheat other characters, clearly that's within the rules of the game.

With player cheating it's a little different. A player might fudge die rolls, neglect to account for damage, or otherwise break the rules. Incredibly, at least one company sells dice specifically for cheating at RPGs!

It happens. Players get rather attached to their characters. They want victory! And some players will want it so badly that they will break the rules to do it. How does a GM deal with this?

Mostly by ignoring all but the most blatant cheating. I realize this is yet another major break with commonly-held GM principles which tell us that cheating is bad. Let us examine the reasons why it does not matter if people cheat in an RPG.

Reason 1: Victory is Assured

There is no end in an RPG in the sense that a game of *Monopoly* or *Risk* has an end. Sure, players can *win* or *lose* in a given situation but the game goes on. As long as the characters are still alive and the players and GM have the desire, the game can continue.

Everyone should know going in that the characters are going to win most of the time, in the same way everyone knows that the protagonist in an action flick usually comes out victorious in the end.

Given that, who really cares if the players increase the odds even more in their favor by breaking the rules? It's all just make-believe anyway.

Reason 2: The Gamemaster has Total Control Anyway

At the end of the day, the GM ultimately controls the fates of the characters. If a player cheats, a GM can simply add more of whatever the story needs to keep things challenging.

Reason 3: Calling Someone Out is Pointless

Novice GM's sometimes mistake their role to be that of a disciplinarian or referee. In fact, some people see being a Gamemaster as a great way to be able to act out their power fantasies on unsuspecting players. Those gamemasters constantly burn through players.

I don't believe anything can be gained by calling anyone a cheater in front of others. Besides being extremely hard to prove that the cheat was deliberate—it's just an unpopular move.

So why cause a ruckus? The GM can simply remove the offender from the invite list for the next session. Problem solved.

Before going to that extreme, a smart GM would be better off considering what might be driving the player's action. Do they feel like their character is not powerful enough? Do they doubt that the Gamemaster's job is to keep things fun—which means keeping their prized character alive? Do they need to be reminded that most of the fun comes from getting into and then escaping a dangerous situation?

Deus Ex Machina

Speaking of dangerous situations, what happens when the characters get into too much trouble for them to handle? This is a common problem, not just in roleplaying. Some early Greek playwrights got their heroes into such trouble that the Gods themselves had to step in and save them. When this happened, the actor playing the god would be swung into view standing in a basket suspended from an ancient crane—that is, from a machine. Thus, *Deus Ex Machina*, “God from the machine.”

Today, *Deus Ex Machina* refers to anything used to resolve a dramatic situation that is completely out of place or unbelievable. It’s used with generally poor results in most forms of fiction and drama. Except roleplaying.

In roleplaying, *Deus Ex Machina* is used to describe the GM stepping in to save characters from dying or otherwise fouling up a situation.

While the *Deus Ex Machina* is a really bad idea in non-interactive stories, the technique *works* in a roleplaying game. It works well. In fact, sometimes this is the *only* way to get characters out of a situation that has spiraled out of hand.

I’m sorry to say that more than once as Gamemaster, I’ve goofed up and caused one or more of the party to lose their characters forever. Looking back on it now, I wish I had pulled a *Deus Ex Machina* in every one of those situations.

If the group faces a situation that could end a character (assuming the player wants to continue), consider having the cavalry race in and save the day. There’s always a cavalry. In a fantasy game, the character’s patron god or deputy can intercede. In a more modern setting, a squad of undercover cops could suddenly bust in and rescue the party.

One thing to avoid in a *Deus Ex Machina* rescue is to eliminate the threat. It is perfectly fine to rescue the team at the last moment using an unexpected outside force: a S.W.A.T. team, a band of armored knights, rabid squirrels, Mongol horse archers, Ewoks, samurai—whatever is most realistic in the game’s particular universe. However, never rob the characters of their victory by dispatching the threat; you’d never allow the cavalry to kill the Nemesis, for example. Once the team recovers from their near-defeat, they will be motivated to turn the tables.

It helps to have planned out in advance a secret ally for the team.² This guardian angel is only revealed if the group gets itself in over its head. If you don’t have one planned, call a quick break (the situation should already be a cliffhanger!) and conjure up a likely enemy for whoever the team is about to be destroyed by and send them in.

Don’t forget “acts of God” as a *Deus Ex Machina*. Earthquakes, fog, floods, sudden downpours, total eclipses and the like are all useful mechanisms for rescuing the party.

² See page 138.

Try not to resort to the *Deus Ex Machina* ploy unless you absolutely must. If players sense that they will always be saved from harm, they may become reckless and lose interest in the game. To counteract this, when bringing in the cavalry, also impose a penalty: take some prized items away, either as payment for the rescue, or lost in the heat of battle. Imprison them, or have the Nemesis “win” that round leading to a real change in the game world, perhaps a loss of status for the characters.

Feel free to use all of the tricks for rescuing a Nemesis in the next section to rescue the heroes as well.

Rescuing the Nemesis

You have put a lot of effort into crafting a Nemesis. They’re central to an effective game and only get better as time goes on, so take special care not to let them fall too easily and too soon under the power of the team.

The motivations of the Nemesis actually fit right in with this strategy. Rather than succumb to utter defeat, a proper Nemesis will slink off to a dark corner, nurse his wounds, bide his time, gain strength, and plot revenge. They always have an escape plan, and will desert their cronies when confronted with the prospect of defeat, happily sacrificing their best henchmen to delay the team and allow themselves time to escape.

Let the players think they have killed,³ banished, or imprisoned the Nemesis only to have him turn up unexpectedly later. Or you can make his immediate escape known. Both methods have their uses, and it’s wise to alternate between them to keep the players guessing. The *Table of Nemesis Rescues* lists a few handy escape ideas for a Nemesis.

Table of Nemesis Rescues	
1	Secret door
2	Battle with cronies
3	Silent alarm
4	Leak or mole
5	Lights go out
6	Holding device
7	Physical barrier
8	Danger to bystanders

Consider far in advance how each Nemesis will *appear* to meet his fate. See to it that the mechanism you choose for the escape or illusion is reasonable and at the ready. Consult the handy *Table of Near Death Escapes* for some ideas.

³ Some more justification for this can be found on page 215.

Table of Near Death Escapes	
1	Observed falling or vanishing to certain death
2	Receives a seemingly mortal wound
3	Arrested and imprisoned for life
4	Lost at sea, air/space/wilderness accident
5	Buried alive or trapped in a deadly disaster
6	Abandoned and left for dead
7	Banished on pain of death
8	Marooned with no hope of escape

The key to the rescue is a vivid description of events while silently and effectively preventing the characters from absolutely verifying the death. Make it impossible to verify, or divert the team with an emergency and get them (or the body) away from the scene.

Describe the scene with confident neutrality: “The cliff must be 500 feet deep. You can’t see to the bottom.” Then put the pressure on with a sudden emergency. This may earn howls of protest when the Nemesis resurfaces, but as long as you avoid stating that the Nemesis is dead as an observed fact, you’re safe from player anger later. If pressed about a character being sure the Nemesis was dead, do a quick flashback and emphasize the emergency that took their attention away. Then just keep the game rolling.

Don’t worry about the escape feeling cheap or hokey. In real life people survive crashes or horrendous disasters all the time. Parachutes, lifeboats, safe rooms and just plain luck make for plausible escapes. In a public situation, rescuers or firefighters and a crowd will come on the scene and prevent the team from monitoring all the action, or at least make it extremely difficult to see the Nemesis escape.

In the case of imprisonment, even if the team is law enforcement, the system will remove the Nemesis from their direct guard sooner or later. Once in custody, the Nemesis may escape by force, trickery, or exploiting a corrupt system.

However the GM decides to pull it off, the rescue must be planned in advance. Always arrange it so the characters can’t verify that the Nemesis has actually died. It’s okay if the players are suspicious.

Adding a New Player to an Existing Group

Sometimes a friend wants to join a game in progress. When this happens you should discuss it with the entire group.

Propose bringing the new player in as a guest star who may or may not return, rather than as a character who will fill a critical role in many future games. After the first session with the guest star, if the rest of the group

agrees on adding a new player, work them into the game as a team member. Ask each current player in private to avoid uncomfortable moments, and do not share a player's vote with others.

Make it clear to the new player and the original group that since the game is already under way the best you can do is arrange a role as a guest star. Make no promises. If the new player works out, extend an invite to join permanently. If that's not the case, you don't have to do anything.

Chapter 21

Dealing with Passive Players

When one or more players aren't getting into the game, find out why and take action. This situation generally won't just go away, something needs to change.

Let's look at some typical in-game problems and see what might be done about them.

They're Not Warmed Up

When everyone first gathers together, a GM can jump into the game too suddenly. If players interrupt the game to chit-chat or tell personal OOC stories, especially in the beginning of a game, they may not be warmed up.

Solution: Convene the game properly.

Before the game starts, allow a good amount of time for everyone to get caught up with their lives and share what's new or important to them.

See Guidelines for the First Session on page 173 for more.

They're Shy

People who aren't professional actors might feel silly or untalented when asked to act out a role in a game. Many of us feel uncomfortable doing something new for the first time, especially in front of friends.

Solution: Lead by example.

The best way a GM can encourage roleplaying is to put a lot of effort himself into roleplaying every GC the players encounter. After all, a GM can't expect players to roleplay if he isn't doing so himself! The more a GM roleplays, the more uncomfortable the players will feel when they are out of character.

When you have new players, recognize that it might take quite a few sessions for them to get into the spirit. Just keep roleplaying by example and gently encouraging their actions. Soon enough they will be roleplaying like old pros.

See Encouraging Roleplaying on page 227 for more.

They're Bored by the Game

If the GM isn't getting player interaction or a player is misbehaving, it frequently means the GM hasn't found a way to get them involved.

Players who are bored will rarely just come out and say so because this is considered socially unacceptable. Consciously or unconsciously they will find other ways to let the GM know. They may shuffle papers, look away, chat, interrupt, read books, doodle, stop paying attention, or otherwise give the GM signals that their attention is flagging.

Solution: Add conflict.

If a particular player is bored the Gamemaster has to ask himself if it is due to lack of action or because nothing is happening for the character in question.

When a particular player is showing signs of boredom, scan their PC's Skill and Goal Cards and immediately create something to involve their character. If nothing is obvious, put them in some sort of danger.

For example, in a scenario where there is a lot of sneaking around, the sneaky characters are going to have a lot of fun, and the combat-oriented types aren't. Just throw in a token fight. The specifics don't really matter as long as the GM keeps coming up with ways to keep everyone involved.

Putting characters in situations where they need to do things they don't usually do can be fun as well. Make the rogue suddenly the only player conscious – they then have to defend the whole party from an appropriately skilled foe, say some menacing giant rats – a threat that the fighter of the group would laugh at but one that poses a serious danger to the rogue. Or put the warrior in the position of having to sneak into someone's room and steal a key from under a sleeping person's pillow. In these cases the GM needs to be sure to describe everything from the character's perspective – exaggerate the action, amp up the fear of being caught sneaking, and emphasize the penalties involved in failure.

They Just Don't Like Roleplaying

As amazing as it sounds, some people just plain don't like roleplaying. I suppose the idea of make-believe is too childish for some people. I personally think that if a person loses their capability to play and pretend, they lose an important part of their humanity. But to each their own.

Solution: Give them more variety.

If you have someone who just isn't getting into it, don't give up. First try to involve them in the game and their character. Throw them into different situations. Let them struggle for their lives, let them save others from harm, let them discover the treasure or some secret. Make them the star for a while.

Treat getting them involved as a sort of game in itself. It makes the job of a GM more interesting and even entertaining.

If that fails, the player probably isn't ever going to enjoy roleplaying. If this is the case, at least give them a chance to go out with a bang. Try to work something out in advance with the player to sacrifice their character for the greater good of the party in a heroic or dramatic fashion. Regardless, always allow the person to depart the game without losing face among friends.

Alphas are Hogging the Spotlight

Alpha players can help galvanize a party into action, but they can also be bossy. As an Alpha player myself, I'm often too domineering in a game – thus I naturally gravitate towards the Gamemaster position.

Omega players are more social and may not prefer to lead or make decisions for the party. That doesn't mean they should be ignored, and it also doesn't mean that they don't want to make decisions or participate! Omegas tend to prefer a softer, more consensus-based form of decision making that takes more time but often leads to the best roleplaying.

Solution: Involve everyone.

The GM has to watch out for Alphas and act early to keep the game in balance. A competent GM always makes sure that the Omegas are getting lots of input on the game direction, plenty of attention and chances for roleplaying and a fair share of the rewards.

A GM might have to shut an eager Alpha down many times in a session by asking them to wait, getting the Omega's input and playing out the Omega's actions.

If a GM lets an Alpha dominate a game, Omegas will become unhappy with the over-involvement of Alpha players in their character's business. They may not be comfortable discussing this in front of the group, but the Gamemaster has to be aware of it, and may need to talk privately with Alphas about the situation. Often the Alpha isn't even aware they're hogging the game – they may even think the Omegas are happy with the situation, reasoning that if they were in the same situation, they'd be sure to speak up or take action, something an Omega is unlikely to do.

They Chose the Wrong Character

Players sometimes create a character and become dissatisfied after a session or two. As the story develops they may find their chosen character not living up to their expectations. They get bored, frustrated and can lose interest in the game unless the GM takes action. This is most common with novices but can happen to anyone.

Solution: Spend more time in character creation, focus more on the player, rework the character, or retire the character.

There are a couple of possible issues here. The GM may not have spent enough time with the player in character creation. Part of the GM's job during development is to give the player a sense not just for what their character will be doing, but what they will find it hard to do or can't do in their particular profession.

When you suspect this, first consider how the sessions have been going.

Say the player is a rogue. Start by counting the number of times in the last session that each character had character-specific action. Is there a balance? How many times did the rogue get to be rogue-ish? How many times did the wizard get to use or learn about magic? Did everyone get to accomplish a roughly equal number of character goals? If you are not giving enough character-specific actions in a game adjust accordingly.

If it's my fault, I speak with the player after the session, apologize and assure them I'll be giving them plenty of chances to play out their unique character skills or goals. Then I make good on the promise.

On the other hand, a player may simply be disappointed with their character choice. Novice players often make the wrong decision about what kind of character they want to play. They can feel trapped and bored when they can't do what they want, or when they see other players "having more fun."

After the session, in private, bring this up with the player. If they feel that they made a mistake with their character, work out a way to change the character's abilities as soon as possible. It is *never* too late.

If this is the case give serious thought to modifying or retiring the character. You might give a rogue some more combat skills, or allow a mercenary to pick up flying skills. If modification isn't good enough, or too implausible, work up a new character and find a fun way to retire the old one. Let the player take their character out with a bang, and then find a quick and convenient way to insert the new character into the story – at the same power level as the rest of the group.

They're Tired/Hungry

If the players are getting cranky, sleepy or unfocused the Gamemaster needs to take action. Not everyone can do a session lasting many hours. And those that can may not want to!

Solution: Since most game sessions last two to six hours, people are going to need to eat and drink and attend to biological matters. Part of the Gamemaster's job is to set breaks.

Sometimes it's as simple as chucking a bag of chips on the table. It may be more appropriate to take a ten minute break.

The best break points are just as action is about to start. For a snack break any kind of mini-cliffhanger will do. Choose a clear place to pick the action back up – a door is about to be opened, a patron is about to pay off the team, anything like that. See the section on cliffhangers on page 287 for more.

Pay attention to the players. If they're getting droopy-eyed, slumping in their chairs, or not interacting it may be time to end the session. Sometimes the GM has to end well before the expected time. One way is to check in and just ask them if they are getting tired.

Even if you have to end early, do it right. Never end a session as a story arc wraps up – the players may lose interest in the game, and starting the next session off with a bang becomes much harder.

Always try and set up a larger cliffhanger – combat about to start, an important piece of information will be revealed by a GC, the lock has just been picked on the treasure chest, whatever.

By giving everyone something to look forward to people will be more eager to play, will show up on time, and enjoy themselves more.

They Don't Show Up or Show Up Late

Possibly the worst thing a player can do is fail to show up for a game. This puts the Gamemaster in the terrible position of having to either cancel a game, take on the role of a player's character, or allow a precious player's character to be played by another player.

A roleplaying game is a commitment in a similar way that being part of a basketball or soccer team is a commitment. Everyone should understand this before they begin creating characters. The game simply doesn't work unless everyone is there.

Solution: It varies.

People are going to have unexpected things happen in their lives. Kicking someone out of the game because they had the flu or some family emergency that kept them from showing up is silly. In this case hopefully the player has called ahead and given the whole group a heads-up. If not, remind them when they return that they owe it to the group to communicate as soon as they think they'll be missing a game. At least if you have advance warning you can decide whether to convene or not.

What about people who over-commit and just don't have time for the game? In that case it's better to get them out of the game as quickly as possible. Let them return as a guest star once in a while if they want.

A good GM can reduce the risk of missing players by being a proper host and calling to remind players the day before AND the day of the game. Sometimes people forget.

For those people who are perpetually late, give them a reminder call a few minutes before the time they should be leaving.

If a player is frequently late even when they get reminder calls discuss it with them. Perhaps the scheduled time isn't working, or a life change makes it impossible for the person to keep playing even though they want to. If they just can't make it, allow them to exit the game without losing face.

Dealing with No-Shows

If you're faced with a missing player here's what to do: as soon as possible incapacitate or kidnap the missing player's character. Incapacitation is best – it makes the team *literally* carry extra weight.

This will take the burden of playing the missing character off of the Gamemaster or another player and make the other players keenly aware of the absence. Hopefully, a little extra peer pressure will be exerted on the missing player when they return.

If the last session was properly ended on a cliffhanger, when the current session begins the team will be in some immediate peril. Take a moment and try to come up with something plausible that fits into the impending peril. Even if no actual threat is apparent, it's easy enough to figure one out. Use concussion from a falling rock, a piece of equipment dislodged from turbulence or maneuvers, an unblocked attack, knockout gas, abduction – whatever you can come up with in the few minutes of advance notice you have.

They Have Personal Issues

Sometimes a player has just had a really bad day and they just can't seem to overcome it. In real life they may be wrestling with relationship, work, school, family or other problems.

Solution: Cut some slack.

If you suspect someone has personal issues, call a break and talk with the player one-on-one. Whatever it is, be sympathetic about the issue. Let them know it might be helpful and healthy for them to immerse themselves into the game. Offer to listen to them if they want to talk after the game, and encourage them to stay.

If the player just isn't up for playing, follow the procedure for a no-show player, but without penalties to the team or player.

Chapter 22

On-The-Fly Gamemastering

Unexpected Course Changes

Regardless of the most careful prep (and often in spite of it), players will frequently act counter to the way a Gamemaster thinks the team is likely to act. To novice Gamemasters this can cause great frustration. “Why aren’t they doing what they should be doing here?” the GM might think.

How should Gamemasters deal with the unexpected? They cannot pre-script actions – yet it’s impossible to guess what the team might do at any given moment. *Catch-22*, right?

Not really. We all know the unexpected will happen, and a handful of techniques are all we need to be a great spontaneous Gamemaster. The rest of this chapter covers those techniques.

Thoughtless Descriptions Lead to Side Adventures

Unfocused descriptions have caused much frustration among players and gamemasters. This is a mistake so common that it is the subject of many comic strips and even more funny stories told over the years. I’ll bet every Gamemaster has done something like this at least once. Say the party is traveling along a road on the way to a town where they are meeting a GC. The players, having nothing better to do, ask for a description of the road.

The Gamemaster decides to sprinkle in a little local color. So on the spur of the moment he describes a castle in the far-off distance. Maybe even something less interesting like a farmhouse, a side-road, or even a lonely cow on a hill is mentioned. The classic tale involves a gazebo. Search the Internet for “Gazebo roleplaying” if you don’t know the story.

Guess what? Chances are, the players are going to get excited about whatever the Gamemaster described and will want to investigate.

This will constantly happen if the GM is poorly focused in Camera mode. The players have no way of knowing if what the GM is saying is a vital piece of information or useless digressive local color. In fact, many players are worried that they will miss a vital detail in descriptions and fail. Because the GM has created a castle, or a farmhouse, a side-road or even

a cow, the team is going to have to investigate it. Why? Because the GM mentioned it. And it has to be *something* since the GM mentioned it, right?

This is what's going on in the minds of players whenever a GM gives a description. The players usually believe that the GM isn't going to just hand them information; they believe they need to discover it. They assume the GM has secrets and adventures all over the place. That's why they investigate everything. They're *looking* for the adventure. As Gamemasters we want this to happen!

So the players are going to investigate. What to do?

There are three choices, one of which is deadly to fun. A GM can force the team back on course, do a Reverse Cluebat, or spontaneously create a side-adventure.

Option 1: Kill The Fun

The deadly mistake that many GM's in this situation make is to try and force the team back on course and drive them back to a predetermined plot. Rigid GM's will try and try as hard as they can to restore the game instead of going with the flow. They get all flustered and say things like "It's just a stupid cow," or "There's nothing in the castle!"

Players *hate* this. It breaks the suspension of disbelief. They'll feel that the game is predetermined, and they'll feel a loss because *in their minds* they were excited about something fun that has now been taken away. And one thing we do not want to do as GMs is to take the fun away.

There are two better paths.

Option 2: Do a Reverse Cluebat

Sometimes the Gamemaster isn't willing to create a side adventure on the fly at that particular moment. That's fine. Time for a Reverse Cluebat. Recall the Cluebat from page 199, an obvious but effective technique to make sure an important piece of information isn't missed. The Reverse Cluebat is, wait for it, just the opposite. Instead of focusing the camera on further information, just repeat the original description in your most neutral, boring Camera voice. Say, "It's an ordinary farmhouse," and move the game on. Be careful not to add any additional information such as, "It's an ordinary castle, and it looks like they don't want any visitors." That creates a question that needs to be answered - "Why don't they want visitors?"

If the players persist, engage in a little redirection – refocus the camera on something more interesting. Have a rider suddenly gallop by at top speed headed where the team was originally going. The technique is to keep the focus on something, anything but the thoughtless description.

Option 3: Role with It

The best option, creating a spontaneous adventure, is the most rewarding and satisfying for the players, but it requires strong technique. Effective Gamemasters are ready to conjure up a side adventure on the fly at the castle, farmhouse, down the side-road, or even with the lonely cow. In my experience this kind of accidental adventure creation leads to the best roleplaying experiences.

To do this right a GM will need to make use of all the techniques in this chapter.

Fortune Favors the Prepared

Even skilled GMs have trouble coming up with interesting responses off the cuff. Always have a card up your sleeve to play when caught off guard. This is to say, you must prepare to be surprised *in advance*. This might sound impossible but it isn't.

The idea for being prepared in advance came from something I was told by a pilot I respect: "Bad pilots are surprised when something goes wrong, good pilots are surprised when nothing does." The same can be said for gamemastering.

Here's how to prepare to be surprised. When confronted with an unexpected direction from the team, simply turn the tables right back on them – introduce your own unexpected turn of events. This way you keep the party on its collective toes, instead of the other way around. This gives you time to plan out and prepare for their intended actions.

It's simple and it works. I use four strategies for turning the tables – Minimizing, Mystifying, Stalling, and Delaying.

Strategy 1: Minimizing

When interacting with GCs, the players will inevitably come up with a question for the GC that you as the GM don't have an answer for. On the spot it is tempting to make up a real-sounding answer, which is just another thoughtless description that leads to a side adventure.

Unless you're prepared to completely wing it on the side adventure, don't make up an answer. Tell the players in Camera voice that the GC's answer doesn't sound interesting, and refuse to answer in character as the GC.

Let's say the team has made a friend of a GC Sage¹ whose intimate knowledge of the city should help them locate members of an underground movement. One of the players begins a series of questions about the ancient history of the city. You might respond, "He launches into a long meandering tale that doesn't seem helpful – or even accurate."

¹ See page 139.

If you're prepared to wing it, have the Sage offer witticisms, cliches or obscure generic advice as often as useful clues. You might want to keep an astrology column handy for just such an occasion. Chances are, the players will turn the advice into a side-adventure.

Strategy 2: Mystifying

Another technique when faced with a question you have no answer for is to act as if the GC doesn't want to answer the question – and figure out the reason later. The actual reason doesn't matter in the moment. Note it down and come back to it when you plan the next session and look for a way to use it.

I call this *Mystifying* because this strategy adds mystery to the game. It causes the players to become intensely interested because they can't solve the mystery right away.

There could be many reasons why a GC doesn't want to talk about something. The GC could fear retaliation, be sworn to secrecy, not want to reveal their own plans, or need a favor done in exchange. The GC could worry that the PCs, upon learning the answer may kill the GC or cause some other loss to the GC.

Say the player characters are having dinner with a GC. This is a dangerous situation for spontaneous play as the duration and open-ended nature of the meal will almost definitely lead to territory you haven't planned. One player is interested in the GC's relationship to another GC. You haven't thought about it, so you tell the players in Camera mode that the GC turns bright red. In Actor mode play the GC changing the subject suddenly. The players will feel as if they've stumbled upon something important, and you now have an interesting avenue to explore when you put together obstacles for the next session.

If the players persist in trying to get an answer out of the GC, either have the GC suddenly and nervously make up some excuse and leave or simply stay in Camera mode.

Strategy 3: Stalling

If you think you can spontaneously roll with the player's unexpected actions but need a bit of time to plan, stall.

Every session should have two or three instant obstacles (typically hostile foes summoned by a silent alarm) at the ready to liven up the game. Defeating these petty thieves, weak monsters, bumbling guards, or puny security robots create at most a few minutes of easy combat.

Here's the trick. Introduce the instant obstacle and just before combat is engaged, take a strategic bathroom break and think out what to do after the distraction. If you need a few extra minutes, the tension of a mini-cliffhanger keeps the group engaged in prepping for combat—the players are often thankful for the extra time.

As you are furiously prepping during the break think in terms of the three stages (Information Gathering, The Challenge, Celebrating Victory). Jot down key points and dig up some GCs. During and after the combat use any dead time to look over what is prepared, make any last adjustments, then unleash it on your players.

Imagine that the players unexpectedly decide to start searching a room for a hidden safe. You had never planned a safe in the room but after thinking about it for a moment you realize this is an excellent opportunity to pass a clue to the team that you had planned out previously. You've got a guard patrol as an instant obstacle, so without skipping a beat begin describing the party's initial efforts at searching. Then suddenly describe the guards walking right into the room, maybe just by saying "you hear footsteps and then the door begins to open." At that moment excuse yourself to work up the location of the safe (information gathering), an interesting trap for one of the players to overcome (challenge), and the contents of the safe (celebration). After the combat with the guards the team can return to searching the room with the completed obstacle in place.

Strategy 4: Delaying

Sometimes you need more time than a bathroom break to properly set up the action. No problem. In this case, it's time to unleash the Emergency Backup Adventure (EBA) - an unexpected story arc to delay the action of the party until the next game session.

Say the party had finally uncovered Nemesis 1's hideout but decided it was too risky without first acquiring an expensive piece of equipment. Problem is, they can't afford it. They get an idea to rob a jewelry store so they can equip properly. Rather than throwing together a barely-believable jewelry store scenario, fire up the EBA. In this EBA, Nemesis 2 drops a powerful hit squad on the party while they are casing the jewelry store, leading to a thrilling shootout/car-chase across town and finally uncovering a new element that could advance Nemesis 2's story. This action conveniently eats up the rest of the game session. You might even have the team find enough loot to finance the equipment they needed.

At the end of the session ask if the party plans on returning to the jewelry store at some time during the next session. If so, you can better plan out a realistic and fun adventure around the store. If not, you at least know what not to prepare for the next time.

The key to these strategies is that the Gamemaster accepts the actions of the party but deftly gives himself the breathing space needed to plan out fun obstacles.

Recycle GCs

Why take the time to stop the game mid-stream and create a GC when there are already a bunch of GC Cards already created? In the thick of the game, keep looking for ways to re-use an already existing GC.

For example, say the players decide unexpectedly to seek an audience with a city official. They begin asking the handful of GCs they have relationships with if they can arrange a discreet meeting. An ill-prepared GM might just say, "Uh, you don't know anybody who knows a city official." There goes a missed opportunity.

That should not happen. If you leave big gaps in GC history, you can quickly cook up some kind of relationship between an existing GC and this completely unexpected city official. Now the players are indebted to the GC and the story progresses.

When Gamemasters plan out their GC's lives to the Nth degree it'll be up to chance that they included the right kind of relationship. Now the poor GM has to generate a new GC on the fly—and this will completely stop the action.

Suddenly Invent People

Frequently the party needs to interact with a GC the Gamemaster hadn't planned for. Continuing the example above, the team, having identified the city official now sets off for a meeting.

Novice GMs start getting the deer in the headlights look at this point. They stumble and have trouble creating a name or other details on the spur of the moment. If that happens, the jig is up; the players will know the city official is a spontaneous creation and the mystery and magic is lost. The game isn't ruined, it just takes the shine off the apple. A prepared GM should never be in this situation.

Here's where the GC Skeleton Sheet comes to the rescue. The Skeleton Sheet contains only those details that are generic and often hard to come up with on the spur of the moment.

When the time comes, select whatever name seems most fitting from the GC Skeleton Sheet. In many cases all you will need is the name, a visual first impression, and a memorable mannerism. That's because most of the time, the characters will interact with a GC once for a few minutes, never to meet them again.

I have never run out of Skeleton GCs in a game but if I did I would either call a break and generate another one or use either fictional characters or people I knew from real life. I might use acquaintances, former bosses or clients, ex-girlfriends, or movie stars (particularly character actors).

When more depth is needed, such as when the characters are likely to regularly interact with this GC, add other GC connections to the story. Take

a moment to put down a couple of rights and wrongs or a woe from the *Resident Woes Table* on page 109 so you know where the GC is coming from.

There are several GC generators online² as well as a number of game supplements out there for creating GC details. These supplements can be helpful for prep before the game, but if the GM stops the action to stick his head in a book the game will suffer. The GC Skeleton Sheet saves crucial time and keeps the game rolling.

Use the Brute Squad Sheet

In many games the team will end up fighting a large number of GCs. These henchmen, thugs, or brutes are out to get the team; they're not interested in talking. Putting together a GC Card is a total waste of time. Even using the GC Skeleton Sheet is too much work. It is tempting as a Gamemaster to ignore any kind of description at all. And sure, combat with nameless, faceless foes works from time to time. It is creepy to face down an army of robots, or Stormtroopers.

Usually though, even the lowliest thug deserves a bit of detail. Weaving these details into combat descriptions makes the game much more interesting to the players. All that is needed is a punchy, short description of each foe the characters face. This technique also speeds up combat. Instead of saying "I attack the guy standing next to the other guy," a player can say "I step back from the big nosed guy and attack the guy with the red hair."

You'll speed up combat even more by using the Brute Squad Sheet instead of making up details on the fly.³

Inflating Brutes

Sometimes a brute unexpectedly needs to have more of a personality. He may be the last man standing, and the party may wish to interrogate, bribe or otherwise persuade him. When this happens, just grab the most likely name off of the GC Skeleton Sheet. Use their first impression as a second impression and adopt their mannerisms. A quick roll on the *Resident Woes Table* on page 109 will give you even more to work from.

Dealing with the Unplanned

Players can really keep a Gamemaster on his toes. As the person holding all of the game's information, player actions may seem completely irrational. Working with limited knowledge players are going to come up with what seems to be the most implausible information and the kookiest solutions to obstacles.

² Which I have conveniently linked to from www.gamemastering.info.

³ See page 150.

Consequences of Failure

What should befall the team when they completely fail an obstacle? It depends on the severity and nature of the failure. Foes may gain a slight advantage, stage a counterattack, or in more severe cases perhaps a GC dies. If the team abandons the obstacle or even the adventure, all of the above may happen and a friend may turn into a foe. *Something* has to happen or the game world will not feel real.

Try to use another planned obstacle and make it seem as if it were the consequence of failure, even though it was likely that the team would have to overcome it later anyhow. If, for example, during *Bandit Lair* the team fails the initial obstacle *Interview with the Marquis*, some small amount of time later the team will hear that bandits have kidnapped young maidens, which is simply *The Ransom* obstacle.⁴ If the team fails or passes on that obstacle, perhaps the maidens are slain. At this point would the Marquis blame the party for failing, becoming a Nemesis himself?

Player-Created Challenges

Often a group will *unintentionally* create their own challenges – even obstacles and whole adventures. Very often. Extremely often. Any experienced Gamemaster knows what I mean. Players can quickly become convinced that there is some mystery or important story element where the GM had nothing planned.

Players are always saying things like “I look for a secret door,” in places where no secret door was planned, or readying themselves for battle where the GM has failed to place foes.

Too many Gamemasters brush off this player-created challenge. They reason, “I didn’t write this, it isn’t part of the adventure so let’s get this group back on track.” But that’s missing (or ignoring) a golden opportunity.

No matter how silly these actions may seem to me I always take a moment, open my mind and consider whether there might be something worth pursuing in that silly idea. A GM that fails to do this risks the players feeling scripted, but even worse loses out on what I consider to be the most fun in a roleplaying game – spontaneous gamemastering.

Before discarding a player’s random remark because it hasn’t been planned, I take a moment to evaluate whether or not I can quickly build a challenge around it. The player’s challenge might just be more fun, interesting, or plausible than the one I came up with. In my experience player-created challenges almost always lead to a more exciting game.

So if you are comfortable about it, allow the group to pursue this newly imagined challenge. Adjust the obstacle accordingly on the fly. That’s right, just *make up* a challenge based on player input in the middle of a game.

⁴ See page 156.

If necessary, take a five or ten minute break and plan out how the new challenge changes things. Keep as careful track of these digressions as you do of the main story and keep the secret to yourself.

One of the best ways to improve your technique outside of the session is by studying Improvisational actors. Improv theater is one of the roots of roleplaying, so go see improv theater or watch improv tv shows and take note of the way the actors play off of each other. Play party games that revolve around improvisational acting to improve your skills.

A GM should work to improve improv skills and learn to recognize a player-created challenge when they see one – if it looks fun, “role” with it!

Working Without a Map

What does the GM do when players unexpectedly start exploring buildings that weren't part of the planned obstacles? In a game where every detail is planned out in advance the answer is easy, just look at the maps. This might sound like an argument to have extensive maps prepared in advance. Not so. As a GM you want nearby buildings to be the most useful or entertaining to the story. There's no way to know that in advance.

Imagine it is night in a large city. The characters, armed only with a single lit torch, find themselves running from pursuers with swords and torches. They're desperately trying to find an unlocked door.

Now wouldn't it be more fun to have the nearest building a warehouse that stores fireworks? Without a formal map you have this flexibility.

Building Type Tables

It's been years since I've drawn a map in advance of a session. But in the heat of the moment it can be easy to forget what kinds of buildings exist in a settlement. So I've created a *Building Types Table* to help out. And because I just love tables, I've put together nineteen subtables to give a reasonable variety of buildings to choose from.

Use the subtypes to quickly flesh out buildings that are likely to cluster together in an area like a fort, a trade zone, or the rough side of town.

Now obviously these buildings may not fit exactly into the time or setting of any given game, or even the size of the settlement, so some imagination may be in order. In *Frontiers* a fuel delivery building might contain liquid hydrogen - in *Anneborn* it would hold wood or whale oil. “Merchant, services” is a type of catch-all for non-generic services – blacksmiths in one genre would be what? Maybe mechanics or hyperdrive engineers in others? You get the idea - it gets silly at some point.⁵

Regardless, it is worth a few seconds to scan the tables to see what building looks the most fun in the context of the adventure.

⁵ But if you know a generic building type I've left out, drop me an email, will you?

Building Types Table	
1	Entertainment/cultural
2	Warehouse/storage
3	Military depot
4	Lodging
5	Dwelling
6	School
7	Military barracks
8	Government administrative
9	Military organizational
10	Merchant, import/export
11	Infrastructure
12	Manufacturing
13	Merchant, services
14	Medical
15	Underworld
16	Military fortification
17	Misc
18	Distribution
19	Place of worship

Building Subtype 1 Entertainment/cultural	
1	Theatre
2	Cultural center
3	Sports arena
4	Museum
5	Bar/tavern/coffeehouse
6	Gallery
7	Concert hall
8	Amusement park/circus
9	Restaurant
10	Event space
11	Public baths
12	Indoor park
13	Outdoor park
14	Public gardens
15	Playground
16	Library

Building Subtype 2 Warehouse/storage	
1	Common food
2	Cold storage
3	Water
4	Manufactured goods
5	Ore
6	Lumber
7	Stone
8	Building materials
9	Local luxuries
10	Imported luxuries
11	Fuel
12	Contraband

Building Subtype 3 Military Depot	
1	Heavy weapons
2	Light weapons
3	Explosives
4	Ammunition
5	Vehicles
6	Repair bay
7	Spare parts
8	Personal gear
9	Food
10	Medical supplies
11	Mail

Building Subtype 4/5 Lodging Dwelling	
1	Squalid
2	Low end
3	Midrange
4	Quality
5	Elite

Building Subtype 6 School	
1	Children
2	University
3	Technical/magical
4	Arts
5	Industrial

Building Subtype 7 Military Barracks	
1	Officer
2	NCO
3	Soldier
4	Canteen
5	Recreational
6	Commons
7	Toilets

Building Subtype 8/9 Government Administrative Military Organizational	
1	Executive
2	Management
3	Clerical
4	Records
5	Meeting space
6	Entertainment space
7	Prison
8	Courtroom/legislative

Building Subtype 10 Merchant, Import/export	
1	Administrative
2	Storage: common local goods
3	Storage: common imported goods
4	Storage: local luxuries
5	Storage: foreign luxuries
6	Loading gear
7	Worker common area
8	Vault
9	Contraband

Building Subtype 11 Infrastructure	
1	Power
2	Water
3	Sewage
4	Communications
5	Police
6	Fire
7	Garbage
8	Transportation center
9	Road maintenance
10	Landscaping and plant control

Building Subtype 12 Manufacturing	
1	Administrative
2	Vault
3	Assembly
4	Worker common area
5	Storage, finished product
6	Storage, raw materials

Building Subtype 13 Merchant, Services	
1	Administrative
2	Vault
3	Work area
4	Parts storage
5	Worker common area
6	Meeting space

Building Subtype 14 Medical	
1	Lab
2	Professional offices
3	Apothecary/drug store
4	Urgent care/emergency ward
5	Major medical facility
6	Mental health institution
7	Detox/drug rehabilitation
8	Veterinary
9	Morgue/mortuary
10	Cemetery/funeral parlor

Building Subtype 15 Underworld	
1	Black market
2	Fence
3	Gang hideout/hangout
4	Loan shark
5	Sport/gambling
6	Contraband distribution
7	Brothel
8	Contraband production

Building Subtype 16 Military Fortification	
1	Gatehouse
2	Wall
3	Tower
4	Artillery emplacement
5	Watchtower
6	Underground bunker

Building Subtype 17 Misc	
1	Abandoned/condemned
2	Under construction
3	Research facility
4	City storage
5	Public toilets
6	Ruins

Building Subtype 18 Distribution	
1	Market/Souk
2	Fuel
3	Bank
4	Stock market
5	Art

Building Subtype 19 Place of Worship	
1	Shrine
2	Church/temple
3	Monastery

Floor Plans

When you need to describe building layouts that you don't have, avoid stopping the game to plan out a map. It takes too long. Again, prepare to be surprised.

The first line of defense is having a lot of generic maps on hand. Over the years I have collected a number of books, flyers, new home brochures, handouts, and the like. At almost no cost, I've accumulated the floor plans of many different types of buildings from castles to skyscrapers, ancient pyramids to stadiums. I keep them handy while gamemastering. Whenever you travel, or even in your home town, stop by the tourist information center and grab up all the maps you can find. Hotels often have them at the concierge desk as well.

Used bookstores sometimes have ancient maps pulled from old books available to buy cheaply. Ebay also has old maps available to buy, and if you're lucky the seller has a "good enough" digital picture you can use.

If Internet access is handy visit www.gamemastering.info where I've linked up some great maps; or plug "mansion floor plan" or "castle layout" into your favorite search engine. The Internet is a fast-moving beast, but at the time I wrote this Wikipedia had a lot of castle maps available. Of course it is better to do this before the game and grab a couple of floor plans you can use on a moment's notice.

If the building required differs from what you have, don't let that stop you. With a little imagination, plans for one type of building can fill in for another. The floor plan to a Victorian mansion can just as easily serve as a high-tech hideout—after all, the players never *see* your maps. All you have to do is adjust your descriptions as you go along.

Worst case, fall back to what you know. Use the floor plan of a building you know—say a school, formerly lived-in house, or workplace. The players won't be any the wiser, unless your players are architects. Then you're in trouble.

Brick Walls

In the movie *La Femme Nikita*, the main character comes up against a brick wall, literally, where her patron told her an escape window would be. This forces her to think on her feet, dramatically upping the suspense factor.

Throw in a brick wall anytime things are going too smoothly. Simply take an element in the game that seemed permanent, reliable, or certain and make it change, fail, or become uncertain. This will cause the players to break out in a sweat, their incipient boredom forgotten. For example, a chase scene lacks excitement because the team is getting away too easily - suddenly a tire blows out!

The brick wall has many variations. The getaway driver can fail to show; the subway can be late; radios can be jammed, or be subjected to unexpected interference; walls can shift positions; the hyperdrive can fail at a critical juncture, and so on.

Brick Walls	
1	Equipment malfunction
2	Incorrect information
3	Foe is delayed
4	Critical friendly GC fails to appear or is delayed
5	Unplanned appearance of foe(s)
6	Foe decides to change plans
7	Security is increased, improved, or changed
8	GC is taken hostage
9	Blown cover, it's a trap!, someone talked
10	Foe using body double or counterfeit object

An Example of On-the-Fly Gamemastering

Say the party is walking through a settlement. Start with any *Building Subtable* and pick a building at random. Take the first thing that pops into your head about that building and, in Camera voice, describe it as the party passes by. Repeat, using a different building from the table. It won't be long before the team starts asking questions about a situation that interests them. If they don't show interest give more vivid descriptions or use the Cluebat. And if they still don't show interest, spring something from the *Settlement Encounter Table* on them.

Whatever the team follows up on, grab a GC from the Skeleton Sheet to use as the primary person in the encounter. As the players engage, pick a Woe from the *Resident Woes Table* for the GC and find a way for the GC to mention their predicament. If you can connect one of the party's Foes to the Woe you have a solid adventure seed.

Now set up a cliffhanger and give yourself five minutes to put together the first few obstacles, scanning the *Table of Challenges*, tying each challenge to the skills of a different character. Resume playing, springing another cliffhanger when obstacles get low or the session runs out of time.

Let's flesh that out a bit more in Action Style, using Arlon as our character in *Frontiers*. Arlon's starship has just landed. The party has just left the starport and is walking through the entertainment district. I take a look at the *Entertainment/Cultural Subtype Table*, pick three buildings and add anything that comes into my mind that might attract the interest of the players:

GM: (in Camera voice) “The first thing you notice is a flashy art gallery – there is some kind of party going on inside with people going in and out of the gallery’s open doors. Right next to the gallery is an outdoor park. You can see a couple having an argument and could hear what they’re saying if you got a little closer. On the adjacent playground children are playing but what stands out is a woman standing alone crying. On the other side of the street a large museum is setting up to exhibit a rare collection of jewels – it looks like they’re unloading the exhibit from an armored truck right now.”

Each description is short, but it also offers the hint of an adventure seed in the form of an invitation to find out more.

The art gallery could lead to an encounter with a wealthy patron, or it might put the party in the middle of a heist. The couple in the park having an argument might be con artists, or they might be arguing over whether or not one of them should go to the authorities about something evil their employer is doing. The crying woman could be the victim of extortion or maybe she desperately needs money to heal her sick child. And the jewel exhibit could provide guard employment, also be the site of a heist, or tempt the party into stealing the jewels themselves.

That’s a couple of solid adventure seeds per building in just a few seconds of scanning tables and brainstorming. Should the team pursue any of the seeds a full-fledged adventure could come together. If not, I whip out the Cluebat:

GM: (in Camera voice) “The lone woman in the park falls to her knees in despair. She looks up at you and mouths the words ‘please help me,’ with tears streaming down her face.”

Say the team investigates the crying woman and decides to help. Looking at the Skeleton Sheet the name and description for Thelma Barnes is the best fit. The quickest path I can think of to a cliffhanger is a low-level brute who takes a potshot at Arlon hoping to scare them off from helping Thelma. I call a break just after I describe the sudden sound of gunfire, leaving the team eager to know more.

GM: (in Camera voice) “As you approach the distraught woman you notice her elaborately pinned hair. A flicker of hope crosses her face and she says,”

GM: (in Actor voice, speaking slowly) “My.. my name is Thelma..”

GM: (in Camera voice, with urgency) “Suddenly you hear a gunshot from behind you and see a bullet kick up some grass near your feet!”

GM: (in my voice) “Folks, I need to take a quick bathroom break. Let’s resume in five minutes.”

During my break I look over the *Table of Challenges*. I think up a quick series of two challenges - the gunfight and likely chase (*Challenge: Hostile Forces*), and if the team captures the brute Shewel might want to use her interrogation skills on him to find out more (*Challenge: On the Fence*). I scan the Skeleton Sheet and use Jake Muller as the gunman. I figure that Jake will name the Redknee Clan (Arlon's Foe), or failing that more brutes (*Challenge: Hostile Forces*) that will be clearly Redknee.

I'll use Arlon's Friends and Foes sheet to find a good Redknee Nemesis as the mastermind behind the heist and a lower level Clansman he's run in with before. I decide that Thelma is married to the head of security for the museum and Redknee has kidnapped her daughter. They're demanding she provide the codes to the museum or they'll kill her (*Resident Woes: Evil gang, kidnapping*). Now the team has to stay alive, protect Thelma (*New Supporting GC Kitten*), decide what they're going to do about the heist, and then there's the matter of the kidnapping.

Our adventure is off and running. Where it goes from there is up to the players, but we've set the stage for some memorable, fun roleplaying.

Chapter 23

Keeping Players Challenged

In most game systems, player characters become extremely powerful over time. In addition to those fearsome powers, they will gather impressive gear and accumulate piles of loot. Most players are quite happy with this, so the GM makes it happen.

Naturally, every increase in power also raises the bar on the Gamemaster who has to keep upping the difficulty level. And when the characters have battled everything in the game world larger than a crazed housecat, and have then gone on to give some demigods a good whupping, the GM might start feeling like there aren't many options to keep up the pace. Roleplayers sometimes call this *power creep*, although the term has broader meaning.

Fortunately, there are quite a few things a GM can do that allow the team to grow in power *and* keep the pressure on. Let's start with the three fundamentals that a GM needs to keep in mind from the start of the campaign: be cruel, keep them hungry, and avoid treadmills.

You Gotta Be Cruel To Be Kind

A common GM mistake is to be nice and make things easy on the team. Players *hate* this. It's boring. Instead, the GM must push the limits. Keep throwing obstacles at the team until they are bloody, spent, and exhausted. Take each player to the edge of death. Snatch victory from them at the last moment. Make them expend their ammo, drink their potions, exhaust their spells, dent their armor, flatten their tires, sustain massive damage to their ship, lose friendly GCs, consume the last of their food.

And then give them victory.

Keep Them Hungry

Showering treasure on a team after a victory is a natural desire. It's an easy short term way for a GM to make the players happy. Unfortunately the Gamemaster who does this is making things worse for the team – mostly by accelerating what should be a character's gradual rise to power. Once characters reach the pinnacle of power in a game system it becomes harder to challenge and reward the team.

If the GM resists the urge to dole out vast sums of treasure at every turn, even small amounts of treasure will be perceived as being much more valuable.

Rewards *are* vital. They should be regular, special, and useful. But it is a bad idea to overdo it. If the team is always improving, but at the same time are never quite satisfied, they will always return for more.

Avoid Treadmills

Treadmills are repetitive actions that players must do in order to gain more power. Generally treadmills involve players having to bash large amounts of creatures to bits over and over again in order to attain the next level. For example, superheroes battling ten extremely wimpy foes, then twenty-five, then fifty.

Treadmilling is a dull and persistent feature of nearly all computer RPGs. In a face-to-face roleplaying game treadmilling has no place.

Recovery Quests

Extremely powerful, over-the-top magical or technological devices are fun and should definitely be used – when the heroes are so experienced that they require that level of power. However, having an object like this around can quickly unbalance the game.

As an alternative to giving the heroes permanent possession of an outrageously powerful item, consider a *Recovery Quest*. In a Recovery Quest the heroes are assigned a mission to recover the item by a much more powerful and respected patron. Usually the item is only one component of the adventure – for example, a key that unlocks a portal. The heroes get to use it for the duration of the adventure, then they have to return or destroy the object.

Spending Character Loot

Just as a skilled Gamemaster matches appropriately powerful foes against a party, treasure needs to be matched against the team's immediate needs. And once they have that treasure, give them plenty of things to spend their cash on.

Like combat treadmills, avoid treasure treadmills by giving the team a constantly changing and engaging variety of options for disposing of their loot. Here is a list of general categories that characters need to spend money on:

- Equipment
- Lifestyle
- Donations
- Mortgages and Maintenance

The Equipment Spend

As cash flows into the team, communicate opportunities to buy and upgrade equipment. Keep the team funneling a steady stream of booty towards upgrading and maintaining their gear. If possible, start this in the first session.

The players may already be combing the rulebooks looking for gear their characters can afford someday, so you might not need to encourage them much. Even so, give out occasional but regular descriptions of gear that is better than what they currently possess. This usually creates a desire. Remember this every time the characters are interacting with a merchant GC during a minor resupply.

Equipment Costs

Most game systems present static tables on equipment costs. They'll say that a long sword always costs two gold pieces, a dagger always one gold piece, and so on. Instead, use a wide range of prices, and have prices fluctuate depending on how well supply meets demand. Let the prices in the rulebook serve as a guideline and adjust them based on several factors: location, merchant, and quality.

Location

The location where an item is purchased should have a large impact on the price. Purchasing a sword directly from a blacksmith in a crowded city where there are several competitors nearby should be substantially cheaper than buying one at a general store at a crossroads many miles from a blacksmith.

Merchant

The second factor that might affect price is the savvy of the seller. Successful street-smart merchants have an uncanny power to detect the amount of gold in a character's purse. Apart from a character appearing wealthy, prices will also increase if a character is foreign, impatient, obviously in need, or displays arrogance. The price may decrease if a character is a regular customer, is perceived as poor, is known to be helping the merchant directly or indirectly (as in defending the village from bandits), or the character has negotiation or bargaining skills.

Equipment Qualities

Qualities, the third element, give the GM many easy ways to keep players interested. The price of a given item is based on its qualities – durability, features, appearance, status, newness, and craftsmanship.

To reflect these variables, use three common categories of quality – Normal, Shoddy, and Improved, as well as three uncommon levels of quality – Status, Master, and Elite. Lastly Used or even Hacked items may be available.

Not all equipment should be available in all categories at all times and locations, of course. In a settlement of reasonable size Shoddy, Normal and some Improved classes of items should generally be available. The *Table of Item Qualities* lists ways any item might be degraded or improved.

Normal

These items are the baseline. When the game system mentions the cost of something it is usually talking about a Normal item.

Normal items are intended for average use. While serviceable, they won't be able to withstand the kind of abuse that an adventurer is going to put them through. Normal equipment can be expected to break if asked to do anything outside of its normal use. For example, using a Normal sword to batter a door down will at the very least dull its edge. Depending on the door, it might even break the sword. A Normal sword will nick and lose its edge quickly, as Normal swords are intended to be used in a handful of military-scale battles.

Shoddy

Shoddy items are worse than Normal - they're obviously lacking for one reason or another. Offer things with Shoddy characteristics to the team if they're actively looking to save money, or as a method of depowering them.

Give fair warning to the players before they buy something Shoddy. Simply giving an unreasonably low price, such as having the GC merchant say "this is an incredible bargain" isn't enough warning. Provide clear descriptions of the apparent drawbacks of the particular item(s) in question in Camera mode and let the players connect the dots. You might say, "when you lift the sword it feels unbalanced."

Improved

It might make sense to offer items that are better than a Normal item. In games without magic, Improved equipment makes a big difference in keeping players happy; suddenly there are many more choices.

Always have merchant GCs offer Improved items to player characters that are more expensive than the characters can afford. This helps give them reasons to go on adventures as well as something to look forward to. The delight that a piece of gear brings to a player is often directly connected to how long they have been yearning for it.

The only drawback to offering improvements to items is the potential to unbalance the game's rules. If the GM finds that an improvement is making it too difficult to keep the player challenged and threatening to take the fun away, you have to depower the character.¹

Both

Combine Shoddy and Improved characteristics to items as you see fit. A lighter sword prone to failure makes perfect sense.

¹ see page 282.

Table of Item Qualities	
Shoddy	
Characteristic	Price modifier
Uglier	-10%
Difficult to repair	-10%
Difficult to upgrade or modify	-10%
Reduced functionality	-10%
Less efficient	-10%
Heavier	-20%
Bulkier	-20%
Slower to use	-20%
Reduction in status to user	-25%
Impossible to repair or maintain	-30%
Greatly reduced lifetime	-40%
Requires constant maintenance	-40%
Prone to failure	-50%
Improved	
Better looking	+25%
Easier to repair	+25%
Easily upgraded or enhanced	+25%
Additional function	+50%
More portable	+50%
More efficient	+50%
Lighter	+100%
Faster to use	+100%
Greater durability	+100%

Status

This is the first of the three uncommon equipment types. Status equipment is designed to visually communicate membership in a given social class above all other concerns – even functionality takes a back seat.

This design bias has a downside. Status gear performs slightly to much worse than Normal gear. Always choose at least one deficiency from the Shoddy category on the *Table of Item Qualities* for every Status item but do not reduce the price.

Since Status items are not designed for average use, much less the abuse adventurers will put them through, the most likely deficiency is “prone to failure,” although “less efficient” and “slower to use” are also good choices.

Because the primary purpose of the Status item is to show membership

in a higher tier of society, these things *must* be uncommon, even if the scarcity is artificial. When a Status item becomes common, it immediately loses its status.

Set the price of Status equipment at least 100% greater than Normal.

Master

Equipment crafted by a master is a step up in quality from the Status level. Master-crafted items imbue the same or greater status on the owner as Status items do. The advantage of this class of uncommon gear is that equipment created by masters is built to last. As such each of these items will have three or more Improved qualities. They will also be works of art and a beauty to behold – at least to those who appreciate the particular type of item. Things crafted by masters take a great deal more time to create. Master-crafted items are usually one-of-a-kind hand-crafted objects. They appreciate in value. If something Master-crafted is worn or used openly it will attract (possibly unwanted) attention. They're highly sought after by adventurer and collector alike.

To reflect this, add at least 500% to the cost of a Normal item.

Masters make for interesting GCs. Their work is in great demand. For this reason, they are often well-connected, arrogant, and unwilling to bargain. They can afford to be eccentric, often extremely so, and their peculiarities sometimes get them in trouble with powerful people. They might be located in some far-off area where they can simply work in peace. They might refuse doing work for hire unless compelled to do so, preferring to lend their expertise only to a chosen few.

Elite

The last of the uncommon items are those crafted by masters for the ruling class. These things are adorned with exceptionally high levels of detail and are crafted from the finest possible materials available. Equipment in this category is intended for those few at the highest levels of power in a hierarchical system – kings, generals, high priestesses and the like. They're exceptionally rare and communicate that the bearer has an especially unique standing. Seeing an Elite item might arouse feelings of intense desire (for the item), fear and/or respect.

Elite items exhibit one or more Improved qualities, e.g. an Elite sword forged for the general of a powerful army might have stunning hilt and pommel work and bear multiple Improved qualities such as lightness, sharpness, and strength.

Elite gear should be at least *ten times* the cost of a similar piece of Master level equipment – or 5,000% higher than a Normal item.

Artifact

A subset of the Elite item is the *Artifact*. Artifacts are so rare, precious and meaningful that they stir extremely strong emotions in people. They are generally quite old and always have stories or legends associated with

them. They may be quite fragile or require special care, be lost, hidden away, nearly forgotten or all but unobtainable/unusable.

Artifacts have special cultural meaning to a people, and certain cultures may firmly believe the rightful owner is *not* the one in possession of the item. Only the most powerful adventurers could hope to keep an Artifact for long.

Artifacts are at least as expensive as Elite items, but often priceless.

Table of Uncommon Items			
Type	Advantages	Disadvantages	Price modifier
Status	Shows class membership	1 or more Shoddy	+100%
Master	3 or more Improved Increases in value over time May convey status	Unwanted Attention	+500%
Elite	1 or more Improved Confers elite status	Elicits strong reaction	+5,000%

Used

In some cases, Used equipment may be available. Things with Shoddy characteristics will probably not be available in working condition, unless they are Status items. A Used item may be up to 50% less expensive than new Normal, Improved, or Status gear, but Master and Elite Used equipment holds or increases in value over time.

Used equipment may have substantial cosmetic damage which reduces status to the user. Complicated gear may require maintenance or repairs not disclosed by the seller, particularly if the character purchasing the gear lacks experience.

Used Status items do not give the same social status to the user as new and may actually reduce status if the Used item is out of fashion.

Selling Used Gear

If a PC is selling their own gear, the best they'll get is 70% of the original price, as little as 1%. Factors that will decrease the price are (in decreasing order): selling to a merchant (as opposed to an individual), selling an unpopular item, damage, any customization whatsoever, wear, and age.

Hacked

An interesting variation to the Improved item is the Hacked item. Hacks are skilled modifications made to items by a character. Hacks cost less because the Hack requires a skill check in order to work. If the skill check fails the item is damaged or even ruined. Technically-oriented players love hacks.

Because Hacks exceed the maker's original design parameters they always carry some negative consequence even if successful. It may greatly reduce the lifetime, void the warranty, make the item more prone to failure, or it may even make the item *look* like a hack job. Curiously, while visibly Hacked items reduce the status of the user to non-technical people, among technical peers, status will increase. A good example of this is hacking a diesel car to run on vegetable oil; cool Hack to techies, but a non-technical person would never buy the thing.

To create a Hack, choose at least one Improved quality and one or more Shoddy qualities for each item, and determine the skill check needed for success.

Making a Hack available for a piece of gear is a nice way to increase the challenge for characters with mechanical or engineering-type skills. Pulling off a Hack in the midst of a stressful situation is fun and dramatic. Let's say you have a character named Scotty with skill in starship engineering. The team critically requires extra power from the engines. As GM, you pass a note to Scotty's player telling him he can attempt a Hack on the engines to get a 25% power boost (Improved, More Efficient), but if Scotty fails the engines might need serious repair, and even if he succeeds they'll consume much more energy (Shoddy, Less Efficient) and he'll also have to keep a constant eye on the engines (Shoddy, Prone to Failure) until he disables the Hack. That's a real conflict.

Present Day Item Examples			
Type	Car	Shovel	Guitar
Shoddy	Yugo	Plastic handle	Bridgecraft
Normal	Ford Escort	Metal handle	Schylling
Improved	Lexus	Contractor grade	Backpack guitar
Status	Porsche	Chrome plated	Fender
Master	Ferrari	Fiskar	Paul Reed Smith
Elite	McLaren	Elites don't use shovels	Stradivarius
Hacked	Veggie-diesel	Two-person	Handmade cigar-box
Artifact	Bugatti Royale	Apollo 17's trencher	Jimi's Flying V

Equipment Maintenance

Complicated gear requires regular maintenance in the form of spare parts, expensive cleaning, repairs, tune-ups, software updates or upgrades, and the like. Maintenance gives the GM a way to constantly reduce the character's monetary resources. And if a character lacks the resources to properly maintain his gear, it gives the GM another tool to add tension.

Give the team enough warning and time to properly maintain their gear or get a replacement. Use GCs or Camera mode to deliver the warnings. If a player ignores the warnings and keeps using the item, they won't feel cheated if the item later fails.²

The Lifestyle Spend

There are always better meals, better lodgings, finer clothing, swords that look sharper even if they don't do more damage, and so on. There are two categories characters can use to spend their loot on: lodgings and style.

Lodgings

The team should always be presented with reasons to spend more on lodgings than they need to. Embellish the descriptions of their experience and make them feel that the experience is worth it when they decide to spend more.

If they choose something below their social class, point out the unsafe, noisy or unpleasant attributes about their choice and follow up on it in the game, preferably at the most inconvenient time for the team. Of course, it is perfectly reasonable for an individual from a higher social class to dislike expensive lodgings, but the game world should reflect the choice.

For example, say the characters are from a higher social class yet always seek out a barn or the cheapest inn they can find. Even if they are traveling incognito – pursued or are pursuing someone, spies in hostile territory or the like, play out some likely consequences. Arrange for a patron or ally to visit them unexpectedly and have the GC act uncomfortable in the lower class surroundings - then have the GC mention that they really should be in more suitable quarters. If the activity continues the patron or ally might even withdraw support. Or have a stealthy thief slip in during the night and make off with some minor object. Or have loud neighbors disrupt the team's sleep giving everyone a penalty on all skill checks the next day.

This isn't about shaping actions. The purpose is to ensure that there are fair consequences for each action. By making character actions carry appropriate in-game consequences, the GM strengthens the believability of the game.

² Also see page 117.

Fashion and Style

As a character becomes more powerful, their ego may also increase. If the character leans toward the egotistical side, present an option to choose gear that suits their style—at a price. “The merchant shows you a standard issue flak jacket, but you see a unique black flak jacket behind him that looks like your size.”

Let the player decide, but always give them the chance to pay more for style. Style is not cheap – adding style to any item will add at least 25% to the price, and in some cases the price can be much, much more.

The Donation Spend

Many types of character commitments might require regular donations. As a character increases in stature, their commitments should also increase.

You might use large donations to a character’s religious leaders, church tithes, government taxes, licenses and penalties, contributions to secure political influence, membership in important clubs, or attendance at or support of society functions.

Craft responsibilities that create opportunities for adventure or support the character’s reputation that suck up remaining loot. If the player refuses, their character may lose status, power, or membership in important circles. Again, do this to deepen the game, not to force players into a particular action.

The Henchman Spend

Hirelings are expensive. As they see their employer advance in power and wealth, they too will need to see a proportionate increase in their wages and living standards. If such increases are denied, or are not large enough, the employee may leave or betray the character, especially if the henchman is required to lay his life on the line. As with equipment breakage, use GCs or Camera mode to give the team ample notice and time to rectify a henchman becoming dissatisfied.

The Mortgage and Maintenance Spend

The team may express a desire to build a castle, own a powerful starship, or possess any form of real estate or transport. Fantastic! These aren’t just seeds of adventure, they’re entire fields.

The Castle

If the players want to build a castle, fortification, or own real estate of any kind, by all means let them. Provide opportunities for this early on.

Why? It’s a great way to dispose of loot and it provides constant fodder for the game.

Castles are enormously expensive to build and almost as costly to maintain. And once that castle is up, it had better be maintained and guarded or else someone is going to come in and occupy it, requiring a long and bloody siege to get them out.

Raising enough capital to begin, complete, and maintain a castle can consume many game sessions.

Free Puppy!

Instead of waiting for the players to decide they want land, you will often want to take the initiative. A castle and surrounding lands might be given to the party and framed as a great reward. But the reality is, it will require enormous amounts of capital to maintain, and the party cannot abandon the site without bringing on the wrath of the local king.

Too often, the GM feels the team has to keep traveling in order to keep the players interested. This ignores how intriguing it can be to keep the team in a single area and have the adventures come to them. In the castle example, neighboring princes are certain to get jealous or feel threatened by an energetic and wealthy character moving into fortifications on their doorstep. Bandits, con men and all sorts of ne'er-do-wells might dwell in the unmaintained wilderness given to the group, and if unchecked could lead to raids, rebellions, and mayhem of all kinds. The King will require favors or impose heavy taxes. The possibilities are endless.

The Ship

Some teams prefer to travel, and a great technique is to give the team a ship to enable them to satisfy their desire. This technique drives most sessions forward in the classic space RPG, *Traveller*. It is an excellent method to keep the characters hungry, and a personal favorite of mine.

Say the game is sci-fi. Early on, perhaps as early as the first session, arrange for the team to get a deal on a starship. All they have to do, so it seems, is simply make mortgage payments on the vessel.

Of course, once the team commits to the purchase, the realities of the situation will unfold over many sessions. Suddenly they are responsible for a huge number of costs – maintenance, taxes, crew, damage, docking fees, cleaning costs, food, clearance fees, insurance – the list goes on and on and on.

Once they are obligated it will be near impossible to sell the thing, and anyway they will become attached to it as it becomes a way for them to get around.

Ship spending works in any kind of adventure setting, not just sci-fi. I once had a party of high-level fantasy players with a magical land yacht that served the same purpose.

Depowering Adventurers

So far I have talked about ways to part characters from their treasure. A lot of those challenges can keep players busy for a long time. However, there are many other ways to keep the tension up.

Give Foes Intel

Increase the power of the foes by having them discover inside knowledge such as when the characters may arrive or the full nature of their plans. Place GC spies where they can overhear the team. Uncovering the spy makes for a great side adventure.

Exploit Weaknesses

Achilles had his heel. Superman had Kryptonite. Even Austin Powers lost his Mojo. There is no point for these weaknesses unless the bad guys find out about them and take advantage.

Weaken Them

There are many tools available to weaken characters – traps, illness, wounding, magical effects, creatures, and poisons. Use them.

Upgrade the Nemesis

There are few things more motivating to a party than the recurring Nemesis. As has been said before, think long and hard before letting the team absolutely destroy a Nemesis.

The Nemesis should progress in power at least as fast as the party. Upgrade their powers, their minions, their equipment at every opportunity, even in the midst of combat if necessary.

A nice twist is to equip the Nemesis with loot stolen from the party!

Use False Accusations

If the characters are becoming too powerful or well-connected, have a Nemesis frame one or more of them with some false charges. Until the charges are cleared, the team might lose access to key patrons, have items confiscated, privileges reduced, access denied, be actively pursued by bounty hunters or law enforcement, and generally have a much harder time getting things done.

The team may have to labor hard to clear their good names and bring the real perpetrator to justice, and even after the facts are exposed there may be a cloud of suspicion over the group. Long-time patrons may shy away from the party, causing the team to relocate to another area.

Curse Them

If the campaign has a supernatural component, curses can be a great way of keeping the game interesting. Cursed items also provide a lot of laughs as a player tries to rid their character of an item that just won't go away. Even if flung into the sea from a cliff, the cursed item will somehow reappear in the character's possession.

The best items to curse are weapons. A cursed weapon may refuse to be drawn in critical moments, cause a player to miss a target (and possibly strike a friend), or even start fights by influencing emotional states in GCs.

Alternatively, you might bring a curse down upon a character, perhaps bad luck, monster attraction, fumble-fingers, ill-timed gastric disasters, unexplained weakness or illness – there are many possibilities.

Removing a curse on a powerful character or item ought to be substantially more challenging than simply finding the local cleric to cast a remove curse spell, or worse yet, letting a character within the party easily remove the curse. For this reason I do not allow characters to have the *Remove Curse* spell when I GM a *D&D* game. Ridding a character of a curse should be a serious endeavor; it's an adventure in its own right.

Outlaw Items

A quick way to depower a team is to outlaw their gear.

This can be as simple as requiring a team to check in their weapons at the city gates, on entering a bar, attending an event, or before being admitted to an audience with someone of power.

The team will generally get its outlawed gear back, assuming they didn't try to smuggle it in. That makes the idea a lot easier for players to swallow.

Inevitably though, some players are going to try and have their characters smuggle in outlawed items. It may be tempting as Gamemaster to make sure the offender gets caught, especially if the GM didn't consider this possibility. In this case give a realistic chance for discovery, but if a player comes up with a clever way to get past the regulations, just roll with it and adjust the story as necessary.

Damage Things

Long before the team has all the gear they need and begins to grow bored, start damaging their equipment. Adventuring is a hard business; battle damage and regular wear and tear should take its toll on every piece of equipment a character owns.

Consider using critical failures that result from skill checks as an opportunity to damage an appropriate piece of gear. The game system may already have a framework for this. If necessary, modify the system to damage the hero's armor, weapons or other gear instead of inflicting some

incredibly gory and lethal result. If the game system doesn't have critical failures, use the worst and best possible results, e.g. if rolling a 20 on a d20 is the best result, the player rolling a 1 would cause a critical failure and a roll of 20 from an attacking foe would be a critical success.

Unless a player deliberately uses their equipment in a way that obviously exposes it to breakage, it is usually better to chip away at an item than destroy it in a single action because players may feel the decision is unjust. Give them an opportunity to repair a damaged item before utterly destroying it.

It is unfair to cause an item to fail due to lack of maintenance without giving some kind of advance warning. Use GCs to make players aware of damaged or badly worn gear and gadgets, or communicate the damage as a detail the player character observes: "As you take your sword out you notice it is looking really nicked up. You begin to wonder if it isn't time to find a better weapon." Or, "As you start to sheath your blade you notice a hairline crack has formed near the hilt."

Steal Their Stuff

Have a GC steal an item from one of the heroes. This is one of the fastest forms of getting someone's attention. As long as this isn't overused, you can count on the occasional filched item to really spice up the game.

When an item is stolen, it is generally a good idea to allow the character to recover it after a certain amount of time, perhaps after it would have come in *really handy* in a situation. This technique usually increases a player's creativity.

This technique can be made more effective by providing only *Shoddy* quality items to replace the lost items in the meantime. For example, if the team has had their weapons stolen, they'd come upon some rusted, battered and ancient swords and have to make do until they recovered their original gear.

Removing Items Deliberately

Sometimes a player will find a particularly nasty way to use an item that either makes things too repetitive or too easy. If an item is detracting from the fun of the game, generally through overuse, you might decide the game would be better served if the troublesome item is removed from the game forever. This is a difficult decision and not to be taken lightly.

You can make this happen in several ways. Such an item can be destroyed in combat, run out of charges, be accidentally broken in a fall or an explosion, or vanish under mysterious circumstances.

When GMs destroy a player's favorite power item, they can expect to catch some grief about it. The GM has to be quite careful in pulling this off. It won't do just to say with a snicker "You trip and lose grip of your Rod of Lordly Might and watch helplessly as it plummets down into the

volcano. Oh well. You were getting too powerful with that item, anyway.” Being that heavy-handed will alienate the player. It is much better for the GM to skillfully weave the loss into the threads of the adventure. For example when the Rod of Lordly Might is sacrificed in an encounter with the Nemesis and the Nemesis escapes, the player’s emotions about the loss of the item are directed at the Nemesis.

Permanent Character Effects

In many systems such as *D&D* there are creatures that attack by sucking the life force from a character, stripping off powers permanently. It is quite a blow to a player when this happens so it is best to only use these creatures occasionally. The same way you’d use a Diabolical Machine trap, always give advance notice of the possibility so the team can prepare countermeasures, antidotes or other ways to avoid permanent loss. If their efforts to protect themselves fail, it is only fair to engineer a way for the affected character to eventually regain their power as well.

Retire/Mothball

If you have run through all these options and still find it hard to keep the players challenged, you might consider retiring one or more characters.

The GM can set it up so the players ride off into the sunset, go out in a blaze of glory, or just start a new game. The choice is up to the players.

I have resumed mothballed games years later, so I recommend just starting another game and skipping a final session. Players, knowing the session is the last one, sometimes like to take their characters out in a blaze of glory only to regret it later. After time passes it can be a lot of fun to pick up an old campaign.

Chapter 24

How to End a Game Session

Do everything you can to end on time. Almost everyone has other time commitments. School, work, other friends, family, pets, and other entertainments compete for time. Being considerate and ending promptly makes for happier players.

The best thing that can happen in a game is that everyone wants to keep going. Fantastic! This is the perfect time to end because people will be looking forward to coming back. If a Gamemaster runs a session until the group is bleary, grouchy, and tired the players might not be so excited about coming to the next session.

End on a Cliffhanger

Long ago, fiction writers who wrote serialized stories realized that stopping that week's installment just as something major was about to happen drove interest through the roof. Readers went crazy waiting for the next chapter to appear. This technique became known as a cliffhanger.

Cliffhangers work in RPGs!

Never wrap up a session at the conclusion of some great battle or the end of a long adventure. Try to end on the cusp of something big, or in the midst of a battle. This keeps the interest of the players high and gives you extra time to craft a terrific action-packed start for the next session. Make the cliffhanger as meaningful as possible – the bigger the cliffhanger, the more eager the players will be to return to the game.

Ending on a cliffhanger requires a bit of setup, so keep an eye on the clock. With 15-30 minutes to go the cliffhanger should be ready. Begin moving the necessary elements into place so you can unleash the cliffhanger on the party at the appropriate time.

What makes for good cliffhangers? Just use the start of any Challenge or Instant Obstacle, or stop right in the middle of an action sequence. Say I'm running the *Bandit Lair* adventure and there is half an hour to go until the scheduled end of the session. The team is about to assault Bawldok's base. I'll just keep an eye on the clock and with 15 minutes remaining stop just before announcing the result of someone's attack. It might look like this:

GM: (assuming Camera voice) "...you hear a loud neighing and see Bawldok climbing on his steed. He gives the horse a cruel kick and the beast begins galloping away from the fight."

Player A: (OOC) "Who is closest to Bawldok?"

GM: (points to Player B)

Player A: Shewel shouts, "Stop him!"

Player B: "Arlon throws his dagger at Bawldok!"

GM: (Camera voice) "Arlon draws his dagger and hurls it. Time seems to slow as the blade flies to its target and..."

GM: (changing to OOC voice) "...we'll find out what happens next session. Thanks everyone."

Once you spring the cliffhanger, end the game immediately. It's tempting to get suckered into letting the group have more action that session. It takes a lot of restraint. The strength of the cliffhanger lies in resolving it next time. Close your books, thank the players, and smile. The group may feign frustration and irritation, but they'll be hooked.

You might play the game theme tune, or say some closing words, but ending suddenly is best. Once the game is closed, set up another game date or confirm everyone for the next scheduled session. Set the next date right there when everyone is gathered and excited about playing.

Post-game Adjustments

After the session is over, take a couple of minutes and make adjustments to the numbers in the Game Calendar. The way XP is handed out will influence future actions so this is a golden opportunity to encourage more roleplaying.

Don't let the players go until the XP has been handed out. Hopefully the XP earned in the session will enable one or more characters to gain skill. This gives the player something else to look forward to at the next session. Read off each action and how much was awarded for each instance, in addition to providing a total for each player. It takes more time but players need to know which actions are giving them XP, and which aren't. The process shouldn't be mysterious or it will seem capricious or unfair. Reading directly off the XP Tally Sheet tells players specifically why they are being rewarded.

You may wish to total up all the XP awards for everyone and divide it by the number of players. This recognizes the importance of teamwork, the value of which can easily get lost or overlooked. If you do this remember to highlight the actions of individuals so players know what they are being rewarded for.

Pick Up Secret Notes

If you've passed out any secret notes during the game, be sure to pick them all up after the game. Some players may want to keep secret notes, that's fine. Ensure there are none left behind. Curiosity killed the cat, and a left-behind secret note is a temptation that can lead to metagaming or worse.

In one recent game of mine a player innocently picked up a secret note and found out about another player's secret ability in one of the first sessions. The player became quite jealous and wanted to change their character almost immediately. We did end up beefing up that player's character but the consequences could have been much worse.

The Post-game Review

How do you know that the players are enjoying themselves? Most GM's I've encountered are not telepathic, and have no idea what the players are thinking about the game. Hold a post-game review now and then to find out. At least every three sessions open up a post-game review right after scheduling another session.

Ask the players in turn whether they felt their character got enough interaction and if there was something in particular they liked. Keep it focused on the positive. If they can't remember anything they liked, this is a warning sign. Set up some private time with the player to discuss what they want to be doing. It's worth taking time with this and letting every player speak. Sometimes you'll be surprised at what you hear! Take notes and consider incorporating their suggestions into the next session.

Also take this opportunity to ask the players if they would like to add to or revise their goals. What do they want to do in the next session or what do they see themselves doing? The answers you get should factor heavily into the obstacles you create for the next session.

Next, ask about the team's goals. Are these due for a revision? For example, if a Nemesis was introduced in the session, do the players feel the "taking down" of this GC should be added to the goal list? If not, you have a clear indication to either retire the GC or change tactics.

Make this a two-way discussion. Tell the players what *you* liked as well as finding out what they liked. In particular, let them know what you thought was fun.

Chapter 25

Gamemastering Out-of-the-Box

To close out the book here are a few tales from games where I stepped a little outside of the traditional role of the Gamemaster.

Surprise!

Many years ago my roleplaying friends and I went off to the mountains for a weekend of nonstop gaming. Before we left I worked up a hefty adventure and filled it with all sorts of obstacles. I began to think of something special I could do to enhance the game and I hit upon an idea and was prepared before we got to the cabin.

On the second day the party found itself deep below the ground in a dungeon. After much adventuring, at last they came into a large and dark cavern. I gave them an appropriately scary description and as they all stepped into the cave I shouted “Spider web! Giant spider!! An enormous spider suddenly jumps out and begins encasing you in web!” At the same time I pulled out a can and showered everyone with silly string! There was confusion and laughter and it was a great moment.

Yo-Ho

Another game I put together was a pirate adventure set in the golden age of piracy. At the time I was actually living on a little sailboat which was a perfect setting. Now I’m not suggesting a GM buy a boat if he’s going to run an age-of-sail campaign! What I did was find the lyrics to the “Yo Ho Yo Ho A Pirate’s Life For Me!” song in the ancient *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride at Disneyland and got a copy of the song on CD. At the beginning of the first session, I pulled out copies of the lyrics, cued up the CD and suggested we all sing along to get started.

You’re probably thinking, “No way is my group going to do this.” I thought this too but I decided to try it. Yes, I encountered a lot of resistance, but I kept at the group and everyone joined in for a fairly silly rendition of the song. We did this at the start of every session and it really set the tone. Despite the initial resistance, the players really got into it.

Speaking Spells

I have gamemastered many fantasy campaigns with Action players, those classic “attack first and ask questions later” types. I’ve noticed that players with wizards for characters often have to sit on the sidelines yawning away while other characters’ swords are clashing.

Way back in 1985 I found a solution. If the player with a wizard is up for it, I ask them to literally write and memorize spells that they, as a player, have to say out loud in order for the spell to work. Low level spells for the character might be a couple of words, but higher level spells require several lines. Here’s the fun part – they have to be spoken from *memory*. If the player makes a mistake reciting the words from memory, I determine what goes wrong, using the severity of the mistake as a guide. The results can be even more hilarious than the “Klatuu... verada... necktie?” scene in *Army of Darkness*.

Strictly speaking, this does require the player to metagame, as well as force the GM to do a player skill check instead of a character skill check. I know, I know, I’ve railed against similar practices elsewhere in the book, so why does it make sense here? Because it puts the camera focus on the wizard, in a positive way, at critical moments. It gives formerly sidelined players an opportunity to take part in the game. It’s not for everyone, but it is a lot of fun.

Conclusion

I hope to have shown that most of the problems Gamemasters encounter stem from a lack of proper techniques, and that games of legendary fun are possible with a minimum of preparation.

Roleplaying is still young as an entertainment form. Yet in our culture where fad follows fad, roleplaying has stood the test of time. I believe roleplaying will only get better as time goes on, but only if we continue to share successes as well as failures.

If you liked this book, please pay what you think it is worth at the book's website: <http://gamemastering.info>, or buy a physical copy of the book which is available on Amazon.com. As a bonus the physical copy includes all the tables organized at the back of the book for quick reference.

If you'd like to see more work from me in this vein, the best encouragement is to buy a physical copy of the book or pay for the digital book through gamemastering.info.

I welcome ideas, comments, and constructive criticism. You can email me at brian@gamemastering.info. I also invite you to join the discussion and contribute your ideas at www.gamemastering.info. May your games be more fun for all involved!

About the Author

Brian began designing board games for himself and friends at about the same time he began roleplaying – at the ripe age of eleven. Over thirty years later he is still roleplaying.

In his twenties he participated in and helped organize small and medium scale LARPs (Live Action RolePlaying), including helping to write a rules system for a Los Angeles-based group.

Between 1995-1998, Brian was the designer/producer of *Underlight*, one of the very first massively multiplayer online roleplaying games. Among *Underlight's* innovations were enforced roleplaying, relying entirely on players to drive the game story forward, player-controlled monsters, awarding experience to players for teaching other players, and giving players the ability to grant skills to other players. The game was launched in mid-1998 and retired commercially in 2007, though it may still be available through the heroic efforts of a dedicated player base.

Brian lives in Portland, Oregon with his wife and son. He is CEO of a software engineering firm, and sits on the board of a number of startups and local organizations.

Chapter 26

Afterword

Top Fifteen Ways to Improve Your Gamemastering

1. Choose your players wisely
2. Follow the rule of fun, not the rule of law
3. Don't pretend to be neutral; play on the same team as the players
4. Put well over half of your prep time into PC and GC creation
5. Abandon any plotting, three act structures, or pre-scripted events; focus instead on creating conflict
6. Keep the pressure and tension high; use instant obstacles as needed
7. Always end on a cliffhanger
8. Flow smoothly between Judge, Actor and Camera modes
9. Re-use existing GCs whenever possible
10. Use Skeleton and Brute Squad sheets to make every GC encounter memorable
11. Up the emotional stakes by using the Fork
12. Keep all the players equally engaged and give opportunities to use each characters' skills
13. Layer multiple adventures to create depth and choices
14. Prepare to be surprised and turn the tables with minimizing, mystifying, stalling and delaying tactics
15. Make the Nemesis the center of conflict

Top Ten Gamemaster Mistakes

1. Killing player characters
2. Making fun of a *player* (IC to the PC from a GC is all in good fun)
3. Letting things get boring
4. Taking actions on behalf of player characters
5. Forcing players to stick to a storyline or predetermined plot
6. Speaking in a monotone
7. Over-preparing
8. Speaking excessively OOC (as Gamemaster instead of roleplaying GCs)
9. Allowing players to get too powerful too fast
10. Reading prepared text out loud word for word

Tables

All tables in the book are somewhat organized and reproduced here for your convenience.

Social Class Table	
1	No classes
2	Man, Woman
3	Tribesman, Elder
4	Worker, Elite
5	Follower, Organizer, Charismatic Leader
6	Merchant, Peasant, Warrior, Nobility
7	Slave, Serf, Warrior, Merchant, Noble, Priest
8	Serf, Merchant, Mercenary, Priest, Soldier, Noble
9	Slave, Peasant, Merchant, Priest, Nobility
10	Slave, Freeman, Landowner
11	Beggar, Worker, Manager, Elite
12	Combination of any of the above

Social Class Assignment Table		
	Class	Explanation
1	Birthright	By heredity
2	Gender	By sex
3	Merit	By honorable deeds, business acumen, etc.
4	Martial	Through success in battle
5	Priesthood	By service to religion
6	Seniority	By length of time in active practice
7	Lottery	Randomly (for example, jury duty)
8	Combination of any of the above	

Table of Social Taboos		
	Type	Examples
1	No taboos	
2	Class interaction	Looking, interacting, intermarrying
3	Outsider interaction	Same as class interaction but with foreigners
4	Asking questions	Questioning the established way of things
5	Daily habits	Eating, worship, work, sleep
6	Physical	Clothes, hair, adornments, makeup
7	Travel	Walkabouts, wanderlust, exploration
8	Slacking	Failing to contribute to society

Class Conflict Table		
1	Masters	Slaves
2	Management	Labor
3	Landowners	Landless
4	Organization A	Organization B
5	Rich	Poor
6	Religion X	Religion Y
7	Religious	Non-religious
8	Old	Young
9	Voting	Non-voting
10	Workers	Unemployed
11	Pushers	Addicts
12	Political party members	Non-party members

Political Rule Table		
	Method	Brief Explanation
1	Anarchy	The strongest rule
2	Collective	Small scale, highly involved democracy
3	Elder(s)	One or several of the oldest, wisest
4	Patriarchal/matriarchal	Rule exclusively by either men or women
5	Chief/boss	An elected or natural leader
6	Landowner	Only those owning property
7	Religious	Rule by the priesthood
8	Monarchy	Sole power vested in an individual by divine right
9	Parliamentary	Elected officials represent citizens, multiple parties
10	Representative	Elected officials represent citizens, two parties
11	Mercantilist	A wealthy merchant class rules
12	Fascism	Rule by (generally military) corporations
13	Sole Party	Rule by a single all-powerful government organization
14	Dictatorship	Sole power vested in an individual by seizure of power
15	Military rule	Rule by the military
16	Service democracy	Voting rights are earned only after military or government service
17	True democracy	One citizen, one vote
18	Artificial intelligence	Rule by computer

Judge Table	
1	Group consensus
2	"Judge, jury and executioner"
3	Elder/king
4	Delegate
5	Nobility
6	Appointed judge
7	Randomly selected citizens
8	Wizards/other magical means
9	Psychics/mindreaders/other psionic methods
10	Truth serums/lie detectors/other technical methods

Justice Table	
1	An eye for an eye
2	Monetary compensation
3	Hard labor or community service
4	Incarceration
5	Public humiliation
6	Correctional action (education, magical or technological)
7	Slavery
8	Gladiatorial

Sins and Virtues Table							
Pride	3	2	1	1	2	3	Humility
Envy	3	2	1	1	2	3	Kindness
Gluttony	3	2	1	1	2	3	Abstinence
Lust	3	2	1	1	2	3	Chastity
Anger	3	2	1	1	2	3	Patience
Greed	3	2	1	1	2	3	Charity/Generosity
Sloth	3	2	1	1	2	3	Diligence

Life Events Table	
1	Death in the family
2	Death of a friend
3	Unhappy love affair
4	Serious injury/illness
5	Lost mentor
6	Financial problem
7	Made an enemy
8	Professional failure
9	Social fallout
10	Nothing special
11	New family member
12	Converted enemy to friend
13	Happy love affair
14	Found mentor
15	Lucky
16	Financial windfall
17	Made a friend
18	Improved status
19	Professional success
20	Heroic deed

Friend and Foe Types	
Friend	Foe
1 Patron	Person of Authority
2 Mentor	Superior
3 Ally	Feuder
4 Comrade-in-Arms	Rival
5 Merchant	
6 Informant	Mole
7 Sibling/Family/Clan Member	

Adventure Start Table	
By Direct Observation	
1	An atrocity (mugging, murder, theft or other injustice)
2	Low hanging fruit (an unlocked door; a fat, snobby, lightly-guarded merchant)
3	Overheard (boasting drunken revelers, eavesdropping, town crier)
4	Help Wanted sign
Survival	
5	Hijack, robbery
6	Natural disaster
7	Escape from imprisonment
8	Crash, shipwreck
From GCs	
9	The chance meeting
10	Tricked into showing up by foes
11	An urgent summons from a powerful figure
12	Shanghaied/press gang/drafted
13	Deputized into a posse or vigilante group
14	Professional assignment (military, corporate, feudal, etc.)
15	Referral, introduction from a friend
16	Summoned by magic
17	Framed and forced to find the real culprit
Through a Mistaken Identity	
18	You must be the new hired help
19	The job interview is over that way
20	That's them! They did it! Get them!!!

Information Gathering Table		
	Method	Examples
1	Media	Town criers, newspapers, holo programs
2	Searching	Snooping, eavesdropping, spotting locked or hidden things
3	Archival data	Libraries, ancient tomes, databases
4	Friends	Mentors, patrons, allies, innkeepers
5	Accidentally	From foes, rivals, PoAs, Nemeses, thugs, friendly GCs, stupid henchmen, accidentally overheard
6	Leaked	By foes, PoAs, Nemeses, thugs
7	Illegally	Bribery, extortion, blackmail
8	Extracted	Interrogation, trickery, social engineering, charm, drugs
9	Flashback	This should be acted out or described by the Gamemaster as if it were happening
10	Known	Pass the information to a player privately and let them reveal the information (a GM must never speak for a player!)
11	Gossip	Through the grapevine, rumors
12	By chance	Examples: a GC drops a piece of paper with the evening's Castle guard challenge/response passcode or perhaps the party accidentally bumps into a fugitive who has the right information
13	Magically	Through an object or spell (such as Geas, Charm, crystal balls, Artifacts, magical mirrors, and the like)
14	Intuited	Imparted through a dream/hunch, passed on by touching an item or person, discovered by visiting a psychic or shaman, inhaling/ingesting/injecting a substance, or as part of a psionic skill

Table of Challenges		
PC/GC		
1	Hostile forces	Sneak, overwhelm, distract, charm, socially engineer, bribe
2	Ethical dilemma	Changes in belief, regrettable actions
3	Social manipulation	Extortion, peer pressure, honor
4	Social norms	Follow or face the consequences
5	Opposed friend	Persuade, charm, socially engineer, lie, turn a friend into a foe
6	On the fence	Trickery, bribery, threats, extortion
7	Friendly mole	Hefty payment, do a favor, blackmail
INFORMATIONAL		
8	Secret door/trap	Pick or disable, break, go around
9	Pass code	Eavesdrop, spy, bribe, extort, charm, socially engineer
10	Lock	Pick, copy/steal key, break, go around
11	Language	Hire translator, learn, guess, ignore
12	Encryption	Decrypt (brute force, mechanically), socially engineer, steal
13	Riddles	Guess, socially engineer
14	Red herring	Uncover the truth (eventually), ignore
MAGICAL or SUPERNATURAL		
15	Spellbound	Perform quest, overcome, eliminate
16	Entity knowledge	Appease supernatural entity, trick, perform task, speak the magic word
17	Cursed	Live with it, have curse lifted by other, perform task to lift the curse
18	Magical barrier	Remove magic, intentionally or unintentionally trigger effect, unlock/disarm
GEAR		
19	Stolen	Recover, replace, ignore
20	Destroyed	Substitute, replace, ignore
21	Malfunction	Fix, replace, ignore

LEGAL		
22	Caught	Trial/penalty, bribery, escape, rescue
23	Falsely imprisoned	Trial/penalty, bribery, escape, rescue
24	Detained	Give up valuable information, wait it out, make a friend, bribe
25	Abuse of power	Threaten to whistle blow, bribery, make a friend, do a favor
26	Permission	Get paperwork, forge paperwork, find another way
27	Drafted	Fulfill duty, go AWOL, spy
ENVIRONMENTAL		
28	Distance	Walk, fly, ride, hike, buy/rent transport, stowaway, hijack
29	Wilderness	Endure, cross, avoid
30	Physical barrier	Climb, tunnel, avoid, destroy
31	Unknown map	Magic, research, socially engineer
32	Map needed	Obtain map, make a search, remove or go around, wait it out, take a chance
33	Unusual danger	Magic, special equipment, knowledge, avoid
FINANCIAL		
34	Medical cost	Pay it, do a favor, trade, make a friend, bribe
35	Equipment cost	Beg/borrow/steal, travel to find, raise funds
36	Loan payment	Pay/barter, do favor, befriend, bribe
37	Tuition	Pay/barter, do favor, trade, befriend, bribe
38	Familial obligation	Do it, hire a proxy, ignore it and pay the price later, make excuse
OTHER		
39	Unpleasant task	Do it, hire proxy to perform, ignore, find ways to avoid

Settlement Encounter Table	
Encounter	Starter Ideas
1 Con artist	Card game, chance to double your money but pay up front, witness to
2 Merchant	Selling desired goods/services, offering intel, hiring guards, robbed
3 Patrol	Seeking bribes, falsely accused, hassled, forming posse, offering reward
4 Burglar	Witness to, witness to pursuit, suspicious person casing location, victim of act
5 Pickpocket	Witness to, witness to pursuit, victim of act
6 Fire/flood	Witness to arson/sabotage, asked to help/rescue
7 Press gang	Forced to enlist, drugged and enlisted, offered job on gang, witness to
8 Beggar	Aggressive, offers rumors/help
9 Shakedown	Witness to interrogation, victim of
10 Bust	Victim of, witness to, enlisted in, offered job as spotter
11 Black market	Stumble upon, in need of
12 Extortion	Victim of, witness to, enlisted in resolving
13 Bribery	Witness to, enlisted in resolving or delivering
14 Hit	Witness to, victim of attempt, enlisted to perform or prevent
15 Courier	Deliver contraband, vital message, intercept same
16 Rescue	Hostage, prisoner, slave, trapped/lost
17 Noble/elder/leader	Job offer, witness event, opportunity to interact with
18 Protest/riot	Agent provocateur, mistaken arrest, distraction during heist
19 Coup	Whose side to take?
20 Siege	Defend, attack, infiltrate, spy

Resident Woes Table	
Encounter	Starter Ideas
1 Evil landlord or money lender	Usury, eviction, hazardous conditions, abuse
2 Evil boss	Abuse, stealing, withholding wages, punishment
3 Evil government	Taxation, eminent domain, corruption, unjust laws, environmental destruction, inflation, oppression
4 Evil business	Poor wages, dangerous conditions, environmental destruction, oppression
5 Evil cult	Unfair tithing, brainwashed child, illegal acts, abuse, oppression
6 Evil gang	Extortion, kidnapping, sabotage, vandalism, gang war, thieves
7 Employees	Stealing money, ideas, sabotage
8 Natural disaster	Famine, disease, rioting, looting, invasion, slavery, press gangs
9 Evil suitor	Swindling family, pressing into foul service or addiction
10 Rival	Business, gang, cult, socioeconomic group, culture, family
11 Sickness	Need money or specialist for healing, cause of criminal behavior
12 Drug addiction	Need money or specialist for healing, cause of criminal behavior
13 Evil Civil Servant	Abuse of power, extortion, corruption, unjust enforcement
14 Death threats	Against competitor, outsider, unbeliever, agitator, activist, whistleblower

Wilderness Adventure Table		
	Encounter	Starter Ideas and Variations
1	Bandits	Weak/starving or powerful, could have hostages for ransom or attempt to hold the party ransom
2	Con men	Selling fake maps/cures/magic, cursed items, broken technology, rancid food
3	Merchant	Well-armed, unarmed, selling useful items, hostile, needing help
4	River	Detour or attempt dangerous crossing
5	Crevasse	Detour or attempt dangerous crossing
6	Weather	Severe conditions, unusual occurrence (tornadoes, dust storms, etc.)
7	Food or water	Gone rancid, contaminated, stolen, eaten by wild animals
8	Road signs	Leading to the unknown, missing, altered to lead to a trap
9	Hamlet	Local celebration, strange native rites, evil trap for the unwary
10	Local trouble	Feuding, xenophobes, speed traps, abuse of power
11	Thieves	Sneaks, comrades, just-passing-throughs
12	Unreliable guide	Unscheduled detour, extra fee or else
13	Plague/sickness	Must find cure
14	Creatures	Starving carnivore, Yeti, dragon, ghost, spirit, friendlies, space goats
15	Unexpected terrain	Mud, quicksand, rockfall, deadfall
16	Bridge	Scary or unreliable, toll, troll
17	Road tax	Bandits, corrupt officials, searched
18	Equipment failure	Immersion, freezing, heat or humidity
19	It's a small world	Chance encounter with a known GC
20	Combat	Mistaken for enemy, pressed into battle, mistaken for AWOL troops, aftermath
21	Traveler needs aid	Ulterior motive, trap, job or test
22	Ruins	Gang hideout, creature lair, friendly GC
23	Chatty traveler	Rumors, jobs, hidden agenda, trap
24	Messenger	Needs help with delivery, chance to spy
25	Troupe	Gypsies, carnies, con men, patrons
26	Keep or outpost	Abandoned, trading opportunity

Voyage Events Table		
	Type	Variation
1	Navigational errors	Bad charts, lighthouse out, collision
2	Pirates	Pay tribute, shanghai, commandeer, rob scuttle and maroon
3	Trading vessel	Dodgy merchant, disguised pirates or warship
4	Boarding and search	Corrupt official, bandits in disguise, their passenger carries contraband
5	Weather	Storms, meteorites
6	Mechanical failure	Minor, crippling, abandon ship
7	Creature	Shark, berserk whale, space goat
8	Uncharted island	Pirate base, ruins, future hiding place
9	Hazard	Reefs, asteroids, salvage wrecks
10	War	Skirmish, battle, blockade
11	Derelict	Booty, mystery, curse, trick
12	Sickness	Quarantine, forced diversion
13	Hijack	Political, piracy
14	Stowaway	Refugee, new henchman, mole
15	Sabotage	Minor, crippling, abandon ship
16	Passenger story	Patron, con, friend, foe

Reputation Events Table	
1	Dramatic success
2	Blatant failure
3	Recognition by media or authorities
4	Public shaming (tar and feathering, stoning, etc)
5	Lawbreaking – suspected, implicated or caught
6	Being wanted by authorities
7	Capture
8	Escape from imprisonment
9	Conviction for crimes
10	Public loss (of a loved one, substantial holdings, etc)
11	Causing a change in another person's status
12	Doing something entertaining, intentionally or not
13	Adding or removing evil to the world
14	Gossip or lies spread by enemies
15	Attaining or losing a position of authority
16	Being seen with a celebrity or political figure

Table of First Impressions	
1	Build
2	Ears
3	Mouth
4	Arms
5	Nose
6	Eyes
7	Facial Hair
8	Face
9	Hair

First Impressions Subtype 1 Build	
1	Scrawny
2	Squat
3	Huge bulging belly
4	Barrel chested
5	Giant-like
6	Short
7	Gaunt
8	Wiry
9	Chubby
10	Grossly obese

First Impressions Subtype 2 Ears	
1	Stud earrings
2	Hoop earrings
3	Dangling earrings
4	Multiple earrings
5	Missing an ear
6	Long earlobes
7	Stretched earlobes
8	Two earlobes per ear
9	No earlobes
10	Plates in earlobes
11	Earlobe cut off
12	Twisted ear
13	Ears that stick out
14	One ear sticks out
15	Cauliflower ear
16	Stahl (pointed) ears
17	Lopped or cupped ears
18	Deformed ear
19	No ear canals
20	Badly scarred ear

First Impressions Subtype 3 Mouth	
1	Perfect white teeth
2	Sharpened teeth
3	Metal tooth
4	Braces
5	Missing tooth
6	Blackened teeth
7	Crooked teeth
8	Rotten teeth
9	Two teeth left
10	One tooth left
11	No teeth
12	Wooden teeth
13	Buck teeth
14	Lip ring
15	Huge lips
16	Thin lips
17	Chapped lips
18	Mouth sores
19	Tattooed lip color
20	Cleft lip

First Impressions Subtype 4 Arms	
1	Arm in sling
2	Missing arm
3	Missing hand
4	One arm cut off at elbow
5	Massive forearms
6	Tattooed forearms
7	Tattooed biceps
8	Entire arm tattooed
9	Obviously prosthetic arm
10	Hook instead of hand

First Impressions Subtype 5 Nose	
1	Pug nose
2	Hooked nose
3	Beaked nose
4	Long nose
5	Upturned nose
6	Bulbous nose
7	Pointy nose
8	Broken nose
9	Flat nose
10	Nose ring

First Impressions Subtype 6 Eyes	
1	Glasses
2	Eye piece
3	Eye patch
4	Glass/wooden eye
5	One eye gouged out
6	Different colored eyes
7	Bloodshot eyes
8	Dark rings under eyes
9	Black eye
10	Heavy eyeliner
11	Wandering/lazy eye
12	Crosseyed
13	Eyes too far apart
14	Deep set eyes
15	Bulging eyes
16	Squinty eyes

First Impressions Subtype 7 Facial Hair	
1	Rough Unshaven
2	Bushy beard
3	Neatly trimmed beard
4	Pointed beard
5	Long pointed beard
6	Forked beard
7	Goatee
8	Braided beard
9	Colored beard
10	Full moustache
11	Waxed moustache
12	Bushy moustache
13	Half shaved-half bearded
14	Wood sticks in beard
15	Ribbons in beard
16	Five o'clock shadow

First Impressions Subtype 8 Face	
1	Facemask
2	Perfect complexion
3	Face scar(s) from wound
4	Face scar(s) from burns
5	Scabs on face
6	Open sores on face
7	Cheek ring
8	Facial tattoos
9	Spotchy birthmark on face
10	Prominent mole on face
11	Dimpled chin
12	Square chin
13	Rosy cheeks
14	Round face
15	High cheekbones
16	Bushy eyebrows
17	One eyebrow
18	No eyebrows
19	Short eyebrows
20	Pencil-thin eyebrows
21	Tattooed eyebrows
22	Eyebrow piercing
23	Brand on cheek
24	Brand on forehead
25	Face paint
26	Tribal markings on face
27	Heavy pancake makeup
28	Freckled face
29	Warts on face
30	Sunburnt
31	Wrinkled face
32	Weatherbeaten face
33	Pockmarked face
34	Facial acne
35	Partially paralyzed face
36	Delicate face
37	Sweaty face
38	Facial tic

First Impressions Subtype 9 Hair	
1	Flowers in hair
2	Wet hair
3	Oily hair
4	Hair slicked back
5	Unkempt hair
6	Windblown hair
7	Immaculate wig
8	Poorly maintained wig
9	Butch cut hair
10	Bald
11	Comb-over hair
12	Pony tail
13	Braided hair
14	Ribbons in hair
15	Wood sticks in hair
16	Dreadlocks
17	Hair in cornrows
18	Extremely long hair
19	White hair
20	Dyed hair
21	Salt-n-pepper hair
22	Afro
23	Elaborate coif
24	Extremely curly hair
25	Oiled curly hair
26	Spiked hair
27	Mohawk
28	Half-shaved
29	Shaved pattern
30	Shaved word or symbol
31	Pigtails
32	Mullet

Table of Mannerisms	
1	Word Repetitions
2	Unconscious Irritations
3	Tone
4	Hand/finger Behaviors
5	Speech Oddities
6	Inappropriate Behavior
7	Mouth or Eye Behaviors

Mannerisms Subtype 2 Unconscious Irritations	
1	The story keeps changing
2	Always seeking approval
3	Relentless comedian
4	Wants to be everyone's pal
5	Talks to self
6	Whistles
7	Hums
8	Always works a particular topic into conversation
9	Fatalistic
10	Pessimistic
11	Optimistic
12	Uses foreign words
13	Fails to complete sentences
14	Stutters
15	Speaks in questions
16	Talks to people who are not there
17	Facial tic

Mannerisms Subtype 1 Word Repetitions	
1	"Do you agree?"
2	"Isn't it?"
3	"Yeah"
4	"Yeeeeesssss"
5	"Uh"
6	"Like"
7	"You know"
8	Uses exclamations e.g. "By jove!"
9	Says "we" instead of "I"

Mannerisms Subtype 3 Tone	
1	Excited voice
2	Monotone
3	Bored tone
4	Petulant voice
5	Perfect enunciation
6	Speaks as if in a great hurry
7	Speaks extremely slowly
8	Squeaky voice
9	Deep voice
10	Nasal
11	Scratchy
12	Commanding
13	Resonant
14	Breathy
15	Breathless
16	Wheezes
17	Slurs
18	Sing-song
19	Mumbles
20	Formal

Mannerisms Subtype 4
Hand/finger Behaviors

- | | |
|---|------------------------------|
| 1 | Gesticulates wildly |
| 2 | Points |
| 3 | Slams open hand down |
| 4 | Pounds fist |
| 5 | Rolls object between fingers |

Mannerisms Subtype 5
Speech Oddities

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| 1 | Speaks mostly with eyes closed |
| 2 | Speaks loudly |
| 3 | Whispers |
| 4 | Clears throat frequently |
| 5 | Lisps |
| 6 | Refers to self by name |

Mannerisms Subtype 6
Inappropriate Behavior

- | | |
|----|--|
| 1 | Belches frequently |
| 2 | Sniffs |
| 3 | Fits of hacking coughs |
| 4 | Always chews (something) with mouth open |
| 5 | Always talks about self |
| 6 | Won't stop talking |
| 7 | Person of few words |
| 8 | Patronising |
| 9 | Constantly digressing |
| 10 | Uses foul language |

Mannerisms Subtype 7
Mouth or Eye Behaviors

- | | |
|---|----------------------------|
| 1 | Keeps lips pursed |
| 2 | Licks lips |
| 3 | Grimaces |
| 4 | Fake smile |
| 5 | Won't look you in the eyes |
| 6 | Squints |
| 7 | Wide-eyed |
| 8 | Blinks a lot |
| 9 | Eye twitches |

Fighters to the Death Table	
1	Duellists
2	Warriors following Bushido or a similar warrior code
3	People who believe their sacrifice will save the lives of others
4	Some (but not all) people defending their homes
5	Anyone protecting a holy Artifact, sacred location or other culturally meaningful place
6	Bodyguards defending an attack on their principal
7	Minor undead or reanimated creatures such as zombies and skeletons (but not, say, Vampires)
8	People under the influence of certain types of drugs (notably PCP, some steroids)
9	Some warbots (Robots designed for combat) and remotely piloted vehicles
10	Creatures that have had the self-preservation centers in their brains removed
11	Parents/animals protecting their young
12	Cornered animals
13	Individuals filled with overwhelming loss, rage, sadness, grief or other strong emotions
14	People who are convinced that death will be better or the same as losing
15	Starving people or animals
16	Extremely mentally unstable people
17	People or animals infected with something rage-inducing (such as Rabies)
18	Young, uneducated people under the influence of a strong political or religious figure

Table of Nemesis Rescues	
1	Secret door
2	Battle with cronies
3	Silent alarm
4	Leak or mole
5	Lights go out
6	Holding device
7	Physical barrier
8	Danger to bystanders

Table of Clemencies	
Type	Example
1 Bound by law	Humanitarian, age, citizenship, class
2 Lacks authority	State police holding Federal fugitive
3 Ransom	Ransom for nobles was often customary
4 Trade/Barter	Exchanging spies or POWs
5 Needs information	By interrogation, torture or other means
6 Not seen as a threat	Team not taken seriously
7 Political fallout	Nelson Mandela, Gandhi
8 Exert pressure	Relatives, underlings, or politicians
9 Cruelty	Desire to torture or greatly prolong death
10 Satisfaction	"You will see your homeworld destroyed"
11 Doubts	May lack evidence or possibly be innocent
12 Death is too severe	Milder punishment is appropriate

Table of Forks	
Type	Example
1 Right does Wrong	The character sees their 'Right' action do one of their 'Wrongs' to another
2 Temptation	Getting or being something the character wants conflicts with what they believe in
3 Internally at odds	Two of the character's own beliefs are at odds, one must be chosen
4 Character conflict	Two different characters in opposition, only one can prevail
5 Compulsion	An external event pushes the character to consider doing a wrong
6 Judgment	Two or more GCs have a need but only one can be saved/fulfilled
7 Groupthink	Do or accept what the group does or be cast out
8 Betrayal	Choose between friendship with a GC or an action that is considered betrayal

Table of Life Savers		
1	Quips	Adversary pauses to gloat, insult or grandstand
2	Negotiate	Foe pulls back and insists on the surrender of the team or makes other demands
3	Imprison	Enemy decides to imprison the PC
4	Flee	Foe retreats for no apparent reason (figure it out later if necessary)
5	Delay	Adversary perversely takes their time enjoying the PC's long, slow death
6	Sacrifice	Devoted GC sacrifices their life, saving the PC's life
7	Plot device	Use magic, a healing potion, a miracle, cloning, or another plot device to save or restore the PC's life
8	Block	GC stops the killing blow at the last moment
9	Rescue	Outside forces save the day
10	Luck point	The player (hopefully) remembers to use their luck point and re-roll the outcome
11	Fudge	Secretly alter the result

Table of Near Death Escapes	
1	Observed falling or vanishing to certain death
2	Receives a seemingly mortal wound
3	Arrested and imprisoned for life
4	Lost at sea, air/space/wilderness accident
5	Buried alive or trapped in a deadly disaster
6	Abandoned and left for dead
7	Banished on pain of death
8	Marooned with no hope of escape

Brick Walls	
1	Equipment malfunction
2	Incorrect information
3	Foe is delayed
4	Critical friendly GC fails to appear or is delayed
5	Unplanned appearance of foe(s)
6	Foe decides to change plans
7	Security is increased, improved, or changed
8	GC is taken hostage
9	Blown cover, it's a trap!, someone talked
10	Foe using body double or counterfeit object

Building Types Table	
1	Entertainment/cultural
2	Warehouse/storage
3	Military depot
4	Lodging
5	Dwelling
6	School
7	Military barracks
8	Government administrative
9	Military organizational
10	Merchant, import/export
11	Infrastructure
12	Manufacturing
13	Merchant, services
14	Medical
15	Underworld
16	Military fortification
17	Misc
18	Distribution
19	Place of worship

Building Subtype 1 Entertainment/cultural	
1	Theatre
2	Cultural center
3	Sports arena
4	Museum
5	Bar/tavern/coffeehouse
6	Gallery
7	Concert hall
8	Amusement park/circus
9	Restaurant
10	Event space
11	Public baths
12	Indoor park
13	Outdoor park
14	Public gardens
15	Playground
16	Library

Building Subtype 2 Warehouse/storage	
1	Common food
2	Cold storage
3	Water
4	Manufactured goods
5	Ore
6	Lumber
7	Stone
8	Building materials
9	Local luxuries
10	Imported luxuries
11	Fuel
12	Contraband

Building Subtype 3 Military Depot	
1	Heavy weapons
2	Light weapons
3	Explosives
4	Ammunition
5	Vehicles
6	Repair bay
7	Spare parts
8	Personal gear
9	Food
10	Medical supplies
11	Mail

Building Subtype 4/5 Lodging Dwelling	
1	Squalid
2	Low end
3	Midrange
4	Quality
5	Elite

Building Subtype 6 School	
1	Children
2	University
3	Technical/magical
4	Arts
5	Industrial

Building Subtype 7 Military Barracks	
1	Officer
2	NCO
3	Soldier
4	Canteen
5	Recreational
6	Commons
7	Toilets

Building Subtype 8/9 Government Administrative Military Organizational	
1	Executive
2	Management
3	Clerical
4	Records
5	Meeting space
6	Entertainment space
7	Prison
8	Courtroom/legislative

Building Subtype 10 Merchant, Import/export	
1	Administrative
2	Storage: common local goods
3	Storage: common imported goods
4	Storage: local luxuries
5	Storage: foreign luxuries
6	Loading gear
7	Worker common area
8	Vault
9	Contraband

Building Subtype 11 Infrastructure	
1	Power
2	Water
3	Sewage
4	Communications
5	Police
6	Fire
7	Garbage
8	Transportation center
9	Road maintenance
10	Landscaping and plant control

Building Subtype 12 Manufacturing	
1	Administrative
2	Vault
3	Assembly
4	Worker common area
5	Storage, finished product
6	Storage, raw materials

Building Subtype 13 Merchant, Services	
1	Administrative
2	Vault
3	Work area
4	Parts storage
5	Worker common area
6	Meeting space

Building Subtype 14 Medical	
1	Lab
2	Professional offices
3	Apothecary/drug store
4	Urgent care/emergency ward
5	Major medical facility
6	Mental health institution
7	Detox/drug rehabilitation
8	Veterinary
9	Morgue/mortuary
10	Cemetery/funeral parlor

Building Subtype 15 Underworld	
1	Black market
2	Fence
3	Gang hideout/hangout
4	Loan shark
5	Sport/gambling
6	Contraband distribution
7	Brothel
8	Contraband production

Building Subtype 16 Military Fortification	
1	Gatehouse
2	Wall
3	Tower
4	Artillery emplacement
5	Watchtower
6	Underground bunker

Building Subtype 17 Misc	
1	Abandoned/condemned
2	Under construction
3	Research facility
4	City storage
5	Public toilets
6	Ancient ruins

Building Subtype 18 Distribution	
1	Market/Souk
2	Fuel
3	Bank
4	Stock market
5	Art

Building Subtype 19 Place of Worship	
1	Shrine
2	Church/temple
3	Monastery

Table of Item Qualities	
Shoddy	
Characteristic	Price modifier
Uglier	-10%
Difficult to repair	-10%
Difficult to upgrade or modify	-10%
Reduced functionality	-10%
Less efficient	-10%
Heavier	-20%
Bulkier	-20%
Slower to use	-20%
Reduction in status to user	-25%
Impossible to repair or maintain	-30%
Greatly reduced lifetime	-40%
Requires constant maintenance	-40%
Prone to failure	-50%
Improved	
Better looking	+25%
Easier to repair	+25%
Easily upgraded or enhanced	+25%
Additional function	+50%
More portable	+50%
More efficient	+50%
Lighter	+100%
Faster to use	+100%
Greater durability	+100%

Table of Uncommon Items			
Type	Advantages	Disadvantages	Price modifier
Status	Shows class membership	1 or more Shoddy	+100%
Master	3 or more Improved Increases in value over time May convey status	Unwanted Attention	+500%
Elite	1 or more Improved Confers elite status	Elicits strong reaction	+5,000%

XP Bonus Table	
Clever use of trait or quirk	1%
Bringing up back story	5%
Roleplaying a weakness	10%
Using rights and wrongs in gameplay	10%
Showing up in costume	10%
Exceptional RP	25%
Staying IC for the entire session	50%