Uncle Figgy's Guide to Good Roleplaying, or...How to Make Your Minor Deity Earn His Pay

v 1.2

I wrote this as a "sequel", if you will, to Uncle Figgy's Guide to Good GameMastering. I realized (after it was all done with, of course) that there are always tips for how a person can be a better *GameMaster*, but very few on how a person can be a better *player.* And that's why I decided to write this guide.

In so doing, I make the assumption that the reader has more than just a passing familiarity with roleplaying. That he or she has roleplayed in the past, knows the important terms and concepts, and is now looking to be a better player. As such, *Uncle Figgy's Guide to Good RolePlaying* really isn't for the person seeking to learn the basics of roleplaying, but more for the player who has mastered the basics and now seeks to go farther. (If you *are* brand new to roleplaying, you may want to check out Uncle Figgy's Guide to Roleplaying for Non-Roleplayers.)

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And don't forget to check out Uncle Figgy's Realm. "Uncle Figgy's Realm" has links to other gaming sites, information on writing, the popular "Ask Uncle Figgy" column, and links to the other "Uncle Figgy's" guides.

Chapter 1

Why Try?

Have you ever noticed that there seems to be a glut of players but hardly any GMs? Unfortunately, this means that there are fewer games that you, as a player, can get into; and that puts you square into the middle of the law of supply and demand. Players are a dime-a-dozen commodity, so if you want to be invited (and re-invited) to games, you have to make sure that you're not one of the common rabble. After all, why should a new GM invite *you* to her game when she's got others vying for her attention? Because you'll be a player who brings so much to her game that she wants you involved more than anyone else. At least, that's the goal I hope this guide can help you accomplish.

Forget Winning

It doesn't exist in the roleplaying world, *especially* when you're a player. Unlike video or board games, there usually is no definitive end to a roleplaying game. There may be an end to a specific adventure or an epic quest, but sometimes the end of one campaign will be just the beginning of another.

If you absolutely must focus on "winning", here's a new perspective to do it with: You're winning if you're playing your character to the best of your ability, even if that means putting him in situations where he might be killed. You're winning if you are involved in the game and not talking to the other players about your day at work. And most importantly, you're not losing if your character dies (those who've read Uncle Figgy's Guide to Good GameMastering will remember that I'm not very big on PC death unless it's totally warranted). In some games, remember, death is only a temporary inconvenience for those with enough money and/or power to get it reversed. And even if death is more serious than that, a good GM will reward a player who's character has died as a result of good roleplaying.

Have Fun

If you're not, why are you playing? You already have to waste a good portion of your life doing stuff you don't exactly want to do (work, school, chores, whatever) so why give up your free time to play a game that you're not exactly thrilled about? GM won't let you play the characters you want to play? Find one that will. Other players harass you because they like hack-n-slash and you like roleplaying? Leave 'em.

There's no shame in leaving a gaming group that doesn't fit your style of play. By stubbornly sticking around, hoping that it will change or because (how many times have you heard this one, or said it?) "it's the only game around", you only make yourself, and possibly the GM and other players, miserable. Take it from your Uncle Figgy, who's left

many gaming groups for one reason or another. I've played games that almost put me to sleep or that were the exact opposite of the style I like to play. I've played with GMs who were nothing more than module-reading droners. All of these games I gave a couple of chances, and when they didn't improve, I left to seek a game that was more to my liking. Some GMs got upset at first, but I'm sure that they were happier in the long run as they no longer had to deal with a player unlike any they had encountered before.

Take it Easy

There is a tendency in roleplaying for players to become very attached to their characters. And it's perfectly understandable; in some game systems it takes forever for a character to advance to the point when he is something special, in others it might take hours of sweat and blood just to create a starting character. While a good GM will strive to avoid killing off PCs arbitrarily, sometimes events turn so that a character will die. Sometimes that death will be deserved (GM: "That lever looks like it controls the gate that holds back the lava." Player: "I'll pull it and see what happens.") and sometimes it won't be (GM: "Sorry, Phil, but I just rolled a critical strike against your character, the blow goes to his heart, make a roll to avoid dying." Player: "Darn! Missed it!"), but whatever happens you need to keep in mind that *it's only a game*. That's what they're called, after all, Role-Playing Games.

Whether you lose a character to death, capture (Uncle Figgy has seen players who would rather their characters die than be taken captive), injury, disease or GM control, always remain positive and remember that (for death) you can always start again or (for capture or other) there might be a way out.

This also means that you shouldn't get upset with the other players, either. Sometimes, if a player is very deeply in character, she'll do things she would never do as a person. I've seen players who were married play characters who hated the other with a passion, then, when the game took an intermission, be just as loving to each other as newlyweds. I've seen players who were just friends play romantically involved characters. And I've seen players who were so goody-two-shoes they would make Sandra Dee look like Satan play the most vile, evil creatures to ever walk the face of the earth.

In one game in which your Uncle Figgy played (a time-travel campaign), my character was a Japanese ninja from the fourteenth century. The other characters were a World War II general, a 1920's inventor, a futuristic cyborg, an Amazon warrior-priestess and a modern-day individual who believed he was Elvis. Now, I must admit that Uncle Figgy tends to get very deeply in character, and the ninja was one of those times. He believed very strongly in finishing the mission (whatever it might be) and getting the job done -- and let nothing get in the way of, or in any way endanger, the mission lest they suffer the consequences. And he would act on it no matter how slight the threat. When an NPC got between the group and their goal, the ninja slit his throat. And when a PC had his leg torn off, he became (at least in the ninja's eyes) a liability to the mission. The ninja shot him at point-blank range. Needless to say, the player got quite upset with old Uncle Figgy. Was I being mean? Did I do it just because I didn't like the player? No. I did it because that was what the character would do. Once I explained that, the player calmed

down. He started a new character, and this time he decided to play it as in-depth as I played mine.

Pay Attention

Roleplaying Games are games of the mind, and that means you have to listen to the GM as she describes things around you. You're not watching television or looking at pictures, so you cannot see those things being described, you can only imagine them. And you cannot picture in your mind those things you don't hear. Paying attention means staying focused on the game, the GM and the other players. If you don't, and you miss something important, that's your tough luck; the GM is perfectly within his rights to refuse to repeat himself at any time. In one game I ran, one of my players would sit and draw while the game went on around him. This guy was only in the game because he had nothing better to do and that was where most of his friends were, but he really wasn't interested. At least until combat-time came around and he would happily roll dice and tell me what his character was doing. So the party encounters a group of robots who explode when destroyed, but Captain Boredom wasn't paying attention until it was his turn. He immediately jumped up and told me his character was going to do a flying tackle on one of the mechanoids and slam it into a wall with his shoulder. BOOM! I thought that episode would cure him, but it didn't and eventually I just stopped inviting him to my games.

Cheating: Why Bother?

We've all seen it (or possibly done it) before: Gristle BoneMeal, the warrior, needs to roll a 15 or higher on a 20-sided die in order to whack his opponent. Gristle's player tosses a 13, but the GM isn't looking so he says, "Whoa! 15! Just made it! I hit him" Or maybe the die gets "accidentally" jostled so that it has to be rerolled. Now here's the big question: Would you like the GM to do that to you? "Okay, the villain needs to roll 12 or less to hit Gristle" *roll a 15 behind the GM screen* "Ouch! 12! Just made it! He hits!"

It all goes right back to the winning and losing thing again; the need to "win" creates the need to cheat. But cheating can breed resentment among players and can even get you thrown out of some games. You wouldn't want the GM to cheat against you, don't cheat against the GM.

Chapter 2

Player Types

In all my years of roleplaying, I've encountered many different player types. Some are quite interested in roleplaying. To others, roleplaying is just something to do when nothing else is available. Below, I've listed the types I've come across, and I've tried to arrange them in order from most interested in playing to least interested. There are more types than these (see Uncle Figgy's Guide to Good GameMastering), but in this Guide I've only included those that are likely to be looking to become better roleplayers.

The Mad Gamer. To Uncle Figgy, this is the best type of player out there. Hopefully, the hints in this guide will help everyone become a Mad Gamer.

You're a Mad Gamer if you use props in the games -- you'll suck on the end of a cigar just because your character smokes one.

Your characters' names always closely match the atmosphere of the game being run (In an oriental, martial-arts style game, you'll actually look in an English-Japanese/Japanese-English dictionary to find a good name).

If you're a Mad Gamer, you do things that will likely get your character killed as long as they are IN CHARACTER.

Your characters are often "concept" characters that, more often than not, totally fit the game genre. Min-maxing is a foreign concept to the Mad Gamer. Sure you'll try to make the best character you can, but only if it fits the concept you've created. Maybe you can get a physically-stronger character than the one you wanted, but if what you really wanted is a thinker instead of a fighter, you'll pass.

The problems with being a Mad Gamer are finding good GMs who can keep up with you and other players who can understand you. GMs find you hard to predict because you're nothing at all like the average gamer. Often, it will be difficult to find a game with a GM flexible enough to allow you to do all those things you want.

There is also a tendency for fights and arguments to break out around you when the other gamers can't understand why you would do such things as your character does (especially if he does something harmful to another PC). Here there are two choices: You can either back off from the character a bit and *not* do something because of the hurt feelings it might cause, despite the fact that it wouldn't be IN CHARACTER to do so (a fate worse than death to most Mad Gamers); or you can go ahead and do it and hope that the other players realize that it's just a game and you're playing it to the best of your abilities (as they should be, too). It's your call. Good Luck. As a Mad Gamer himself, your Uncle Figgy sympathizes with your plight.

The Powergamer (Min/Maxer or "Munchkin"). Do you want to *win?* When you make a new character do you do everything in your power to get the most bonuses. The most plusses. The best armor, best weapons, best and highest skills? You just might be a Powergamer.

If there's a point-break or die bonus, you find it. You genuinely like role-playing,

but you're locked into the concept of "beating the game". Instead of being "concept" characters, yours are the "best" that the genre or game system has to offer.

You've examined the rules as much as you can and you've found *the* most useful character type and that's the one you always play. In games where point values are used to design characters, you constantly redesign your characters for maximum cost-effectiveness and point-breaks.

There are few inherent problems involved in being a Powergamer. You tend to shine in whatever it is the game calls for. If it's combat-oriented, your character is a combat monster. If it's all about adventure, your character's a veteran who was right there at the opening of King Tut's tomb.

The problem with being a Powergamer is that you tend not to use much imagination when creating a character -- you pick the one that you feel has the most advantages in a given game and you stick with it. And when that one dies, you go for another one that's exactly the same (or at least as close as you can get it). In some games (run by some GMs), unfortunately, that's probably for the best. But in a game that rewards good roleplaying above all else, you may be stuck. You should try to get out of the habit of looking for the most powerful characters, and instead focus on how you can find the advantages (and fun) of other types.

The Average Joe. The basic gamer. There is nothing extraordinary about the Average Joe in any way, either positive or negative. You like roleplaying, but your characters all tend to have the same personality; usually yours. They think the way you think. Talk the way you talk. And act the way you act.

A big problem with being an Average Joe is that you don't really shine in any given game. You will always be overshadowed by the Powergamer who is busily trying to blow the game away or the Mad Gamer who just has so much depth in her characters. You're also easy for a good GM to predict and manipulate. Because your characters are all the same, it's very easy for a GM to know that what worked with one will work with them all.

Break out of your mold. Give your characters a background (ask the GM for help if you need to, the good GM will fall all over himself because he's so thrilled that you asked). Give your characters a mind of their own. When put in a situation where you need to come up with something, don't think "what should I do?", think "what would *my character* do?".

The Copycat. You really, really like a certain comic strip, television series or movie, and you think that this *one* character is just the greatest. When it comes time to play, you absolutely *must* be able to play that one.

Problem is, in a game with randomly-determined attributes and/or skills, it's highly improbable that you'll luck onto the exact die-rolls needed to recreate your favorite character. In a game where attributes and skills are based on a point cost, you might not be allowed enough starting points to perfectly mimic his abilities. And then there's the problem that the GM might be just a little bit *too* familiar with the character you're copying, and will then use what he knows the weaknesses of the character to be.

Instead of trying to exactly duplicate these characters you love so much, take a moment to analyze exactly *what* it was about them that made them special to you. Was it

attitude? That comes free with any character because you add it. Was it one or two special abilities, perhaps? Maybe you could get them at a much reduced level of power; a character like your favorite only just starting out on his adventuring career. Take those one or two things that really made you fall in love with the character and build something new from there. That way you keep both the GM and the other players guessing.

The Psycho Killer. You like roleplaying, but your character is "the boss". And when an NPC (or sometimes even a PC) gets in your way, it's time to kill them. When you go shopping for a weapon and the store-owner won't give you a price you want, you kill him. If a cop stops you for something, you kill him. If anyone in the least bit annoys you, you kill them. You believe that your character is the penultimate being and every NPC should bow to you just by right of being a player character. And there should never, ever be consequences to any of these deaths.

       Problems? You definitely won't fit in (or like) a realistic game where the authorities hunt down psychotic murderers, because your character will be labeled one. Chances are, you'll only fit in with a group of Combat Monsters or more Psycho Killers (but watch your back). Some game systems were designed exclusively for this type of player. Others weren't. If that's all you want to do, fine, go right ahead. Just don't do it in a game where it's not appreciated.

       Uncle Figgy once played in a supers game where one of the players was a serious Psycho Killer. The GM actually had the mayor of the town hire the Killer's teammates to bring him in...

The Combat Monster. You like roleplaying but only because of the combat. For the most part, you sit back and let everyone else run the game until combat time comes, then you leap into action. You're not particularly happy with adventures that consist of traps, puzzles and thinking. You mostly just want to roll dice and see how much damage you can do to things.

       My advice is the same for the Psycho Killer -- some games are made for this sort of play and some aren't. If you like what you're doing, stick with that kind of game. Whatever you do, don't try to sit through a game where the GM rewards roleplaying rather than hack-n-slash, because neither of you will be getting what you want from the other, and the unhappiness in the air can't do anything but make all the other players miserable.

All the World Hates a Rules Lawyer

       Don't be one. It goes right back to the "Take it Easy" section. But that doesn't mean that you're not allowed to question rules that you aren't clear on. A good GM will have explained any rules-variants before the game started, and if you're unclear on something during play, go ahead and ask. It's possible that the GM might have made a mistake or he could just be fudging rules to try to cover up a mistake. No matter what the GM says, don't argue with the call -- you only antagonize the GM (and the other players who have to wait until you settle things), and chances are good that you won't change his

mind in the least (people, GMs especially, can get very defensive -- even to the point of stupidity -- when challenged). And, horror of horrors, there might even be extenuating circumstances in effect that your character (and therefore *you*) would not be aware of. In one superhero game that I ran, the PCs ran into a supervillain whom they promptly surrounded. One of them got blasted and the player went off like a firecracker: "What do you mean Tank gets hit'!? Superpowers take one turn to activate!" At which point your Uncle Figgy calmly responded. "Makes you wonder how it happened, then, doesn't it?" The other players took the hint and began to search for the villain's laser-toting toady hiding behind a car. But Tank's player wouldn't be mollified so easily. "I didn't even get to roll for a dodge!" He insisted. "You didn't see the attack coming," I said. "That's bull! I would have seen it coming if he'd taken one turn to activate his powers!" (It's been Uncle Figgy's experience that most Rules Lawyers are usually Powergamers who feel that they're somehow "losing".) "Maybe that's because he didn't activate his powers," I told him so I could get the game back on track. Finally, he seemed to get it.

Again, like I said, that doesn't mean that you're not allowed to question obvious rules mistakes (though a bad GM might think that his word is unquestionable law), but don't argue with the GM even if he is wrong. If it really bothers you, bring it up *after* the game and see if you can resolve the problem. If you can't, and you really didn't enjoy the game, walk. There's no law that says you *have* to put up with bad GMs or rules-variants that you don't agree with. Here's another example (another supers game, this one in which Uncle Figgy was a player): During a fierce battle, one of the PCs was struck by a laser-blast. The rules of the game system we were playing state that when a potential hit is made, the character in question gets to roll against a defense score to dodge or block the blow (roll the number or less, and it's usually a pretty low number). The GM, however, had gotten the rule confused with a different game system rule stating that the defense score was subtracted from the offensive score of the attacker. Unfortunately, in the game system we happened to be playing, that meant the almost certain annihilation of the entire party. It wasn't my character getting hit, but I found the mistake to be vastly unfair, so I said something about it. The GM immediately became defensive (he was used to being considered infallible by his regular gaming group) and told me that "as far as he knew", his interpretation of the rule was correct. To me, the "as far as he knew" part meant that he wasn't sure, so I showed him the rule (which was so solidly-written that there was no way to misinterpret it), at which point I was assailed with, "Don't argue with me, man. I don't appreciate Rules Lawyers." Realizing that this was a man who could not admit a mistake, I apologized and we continued with the game, even though I (and a couple of the other players) knew I was right. I tried speaking to him about it afterwards (when several players had gone home), but he was immovable in his stance. Neither Uncle Figgy nor anyone else at the table that night ever played another game with that particular GM.

RolePlaying vs. Adventuring
The Main Event!

Throughout the course of modern gaming, one question usually comes up; a question that splits gamers down the middle -- each group totally, adamantly,

almost violently, pro or con. "Which is better?" They ask. "Roleplaying or adventuring (usually translated as having strong, combat-oriented characters)?"

Uncle Figgy says that it's like trying to compare a filing cabinet to a banana. Filing cabinets are great when you need to store important business papers, but they aren't very nice to eat when you're hungry. And, like most everything in this world, it's not just a simple, black-or-white, on-or-off, light-or-dark question. They're not mutually exclusive. No law says that a game with roleplaying can't have adventure or vice versa. To me, the good game has both.

As a player, you need to come up with a strong character who can survive the adventures your GM constructs. But you also need to do something with that character to make it more than just a piece of paper scribbled with numbers. In my campaigns, I will reward the player who makes an effort to roleplay (even if he is the most pathetic actor in the world) more than the player who has the best character in the world but who does nothing with it other than tossing around the dice when it's required. But as that avid roleplayer, your character had *still* better be somewhat suited to the game I have planned (and I always give warnings during character creation; such as: "It's going to be a very swashbuckling type of game so pirate-style characters will probably do best" or "It's going to be a game of action, adventure and mystery, so you'll need well-rounded characters with a variety of combat and non-combat abilities.") or it will likely end up as a stain on the pavement.

Test me. Stretch my limits. I enjoy running an exciting game just as much as you enjoy playing in one, and I can't do it without good players. GMs who just roll dice and announce the results run games in which I would never play. The game can't exist without both of you, so it's just as much your property as it is the GM's. He's making you work for what you get out of it. Make him work for what he gets. Make me think. Make me have to dig through the rules or improvise one on the spot. There is much more to true RolePlaying than just rolling dice and killing monsters. Give it to the good GM and he'll reward you in return.

Chapter 3

Get to Work

"Wait!" You say. "RPGs are supposed to be fun!" Have you ever known a serious model enthusiast? Some of the work they do is so minute, detailed, precise and exacting that it'll wear you out just to watch them. But to them it's not work at all -- they're having a blast. Roleplaying is a hobby just like model-railroading, stamp-collecting or any of the others out there. They take a little bit of effort, but that effort should be fun.

So what's your job as a roleplayer? The main one: Know your character. Know what it can or cannot do. Know the stats and what they mean. If the GM asks you what your character's IQ is, you should be able to rattle it off in a heartbeat. If you can't then it means that either you have too many characters to keep track of, you don't really care about *this* particular character or that you don't really care about this particular game. If your character can cast spells, know what those spells are and what they can do – that's the only way you'll know the best times to use them. You shouldn't ever need to ask the GM "can my character do this...".

Also, "knowing your character" goes above and beyond the game mechanics; it drills right to the heart of the character itself. Worse than asking the GM if your character "can" do something is asking if your character "would" do something. You're the one who decides that, not the GM. The good GM decides only what her NPCs would or would not do, she doesn't make those decisions for the Player Characters.

Second: Know the game system you're playing in. Now this doesn't mean that you have to know the rules like the back of your hand including every monster type and how much damage they can take before they die. This means knowing things like which actions are acceptable and which aren't. If your game gives no rules for martial-arts combat, you should know better than to tell the GM that your character is going to go for a spinning hook-kick to his opponents face.

Third: Learn how to separate yourself from your character. The actual phrase is "player knowledge versus character knowledge" -- although *you* might know every monster type and how much damage they can take before they die, your character probably won't. Here's a good example of what I mean:

The party of PCs has split up, and your character goes with Group B. Meanwhile, Group A finds out that a powerful artifact is hidden in the well just outside where Group B is waiting. Now you, as a player, will most likely have heard this exchange between the GM and the players of Group A, so you are well aware of the location of the artifact. Now forget about it. Act as though you didn't hear any of it -- because your character didn't. Don't try to weasel some "innocent-yet-contrived" way of getting into that well. Uncle Figgy has seen many players who, in the above-described situation, will start making all sorts of excuses to go to the well: "It's hot out, isn't it? Maybe I should go to the well and get some water. Oops! I fall in!" or "You know, that well looks suspicious to me, I'm going to check it out." In all of these cases, Uncle Figgy was more than happy to penalize these players for poor roleplaying. If the GM ever has to say, "Your character wouldn't know that", you know you've crossed the line.

Be Original

       Okay, so your GM is starting a new campaign and everyone is starting new characters. The first temptation is to powergame; find the strongest type of character, create just that kind, and min-max the bejeezus out of it. The second temptation is just to play the same type of character you've always played; you like warriors, why not play another warrior?

       So why *not* play another warrior? But why not play that warrior a little bit differently this time? We've all seen the barbarian with the sword that could be used as an I-Beam in a skyscraper. We've all seen the armored knight walking around in his Sherman-tank plate-mail wielding a two-handed sword. But not all warriors have to be like that. They can use different weapons -- I've yet to see rules (though I might be wrong) that say all warriors MUST use swords. A warrior doesn't have to be just a muscle-bound doofus who beats the tar out of anything that gets in his way. Remember Conan the Barbarian? Believe it or not, he was a thief! (There are more ways to steal than just picking locks or pockets). And a person very close to me once created a warrior-type character who was about seven feet tall and stronger than three men -- but she refused to ever shed blood (or even kill) and she would fight only in self-defense. She used her great strength only to subdue.

       By taking the stereotype and twisting it, she created a character with much more depth than the average braindead brawler. Do the same with your own characters. Granted, in some game systems it is easier to do this than in others. In one system, Uncle Figgy was able to create a wizard who used throwing hammers as weapons instead of the usual staff and/or dagger. In another system, such a character could never have existed (unless the GM were playing a *very* alternate set of house rules). But there are still things you can do to make the character different, read on...

Add Depth

       What if you're playing in a system (or with a GM) where you simply *can't* twist the stereotype? Add some little details that make your character different. What made

Uncle Figgy's wizard character so special? It could have been the strange choice of weapons, but ask the other players what they remember most about him and they probably won't even remember the fact that he used throwing hammers. First of all they would probably tell you about his smile. He never stopped grinning, even when he was angry or bleeding to death. Some of them might remember more the fact that he was a compulsive liar, even contradicting his own stories just so he could lie even more ("Well, when I was in the Queen's Navy..." "You never told me you were in the navy!" "What are you talking about? I was never in the navy!"). And then there was his real name, Tree Snake, but the other players would never have remembered that because he never told

them; anytime someone introduced themselves, he had a new name!

Whether they're minor personality blips like a warrior who talks to his sword or sings whenever going into battle, or major vows like that taken by the thief who will not steal from those of his own race or nationality or the noble knight who must always announce a challenge to his foes, these things can add dimension to an otherwise flat character. Just don't get obnoxious with it because then it leaves the realm of good roleplaying and enters into the realm of childishness. In one campaign I ran, I had a player who decided that her character liked to chew on licorice root. Every time the characters weren't doing anything important, the player would announce "Quartz pulls out a stick of licorice root and starts chewing on it" (and I *do* mean *every* time!). Every time the party would camp outside, the player would ask if any of the plants nearby were licorice. After awhile, it began to get very annoying, both to the GM and the other players. After all, the fact that the character likes to chew on licorice root isn't exactly as important to gameplay as a character who refuses to kill his opponents. It just shouldn't have come up as often as it did.

Once you've settled on the "what" of these character extras, come up with a "why". Why does your character dislike boats? Did he almost drown as a child? Did one of his siblings drown? Why does this other character prefer a staff to a sword? Does she feel that shedding blood is worse than pummeling someone to death? Is it some form of religious or philosophical belief about the differences between wood or steel? The "what" makes your character different than any of the others, but it's the "why" that gives them a history and a background. J.R.R. Tolkien, author of one of the all-time classics of Fantasy literature, spent years creating an intense history for his world before he ever began writing even the first novel -- and it showed in his writing. You don't have to work years on the "why" of your character's personality quirks, and you don't even have to tell anyone about all of them (just like Tree Snake's true name), but just the fact that they exist will influence the way that character acts and interacts. Just by having this background, you've taken your character one step farther away from game stats scrawled on a piece of paper and one step closer to three-dimensional, dramatic life.

Overuse Your Imagination

Player: Gristle hits. *roll, roll* The monster takes 7 points of damage. GM: *roll* Okay, the monster hits. Gristle takes *roll* 5 points of damage. Yawnsville! Granted, the biggest job of imagination falls upon the GM's shoulders, but the player has to carry his share of the burden, too. How many swashbuckleresque movies have you seen where the combatants stand in one place and take turns swinging swords at each other? Uncle Figgy would be surprised if you'd seen any like that. In the movies and in literature, the characters jump on tables and climb steps. Gun battles are fast and furious with characters shouting "cover me!" while they run from behind one car to the next. Mugs get thrown. Tires get shot out. Stuff happens.

In a roleplaying game, "stuff" to happen requires a little bit of effort on both the GM and the player. Surrounded and weaponless? Tell the GM that you're picking up the nearest folding-metal chair and, holding it by the legs, swinging it at the first thing to come near you. Let the GM worry about penalties and bonuses and damage -- that's his

job. You've done yours by spicing things up a bit. Has the GM described something that would seem totally innocuous? Pencils in a pencil-holder on the desk, maybe? Do something with them, don't let the GM off the hook by thinking, "Pencils. Okay." (One of your Uncle Figgy's characters has the talent of taking anything pointed and turning it into a throwing weapon. The GM has to decide how much damage that pencil does, but he better be ready for any way it can be used because if he's put it in a game that I'm playing, it *will* be put to any use.) Think long and hard about some of the most harmless things and you'll probably come up with thousands of uses for them. Let the GM come up with the game particulars for those things (and if he can't or won't, point him to Uncle Figgy's Guide to Good GameMastering).

So how would Uncle Figgy (as a player) spice up the above combat? UF: How big does the monster look? GM: He looks pretty strong and tough. A little bit bigger than Gristle. UF: What's in the room around us? GM: Gristle is standing next to a smallish, rectangular table and the monster is standing next to his bed of dried straw. There are a couple of torches hanging on the walls of the room. UF: Okay. Gristle's going to pick up the table and run it like a battering ram into the monster's gut. GM (caught totally unawares because he was expecting Gristle to draw his sword and rush for the thing): Okay, picking the table up is no problem. Roll against... um... your Dexterity to hit the monster. UF: *rolls and makes it* Piece of cake. GM: Okay, you ram the table into the monster's stomach and it *roll* fails a roll against it's strength to keep standing. You knock it down onto the pile of straw. UF: Okay, I grab one of the torches and toss it onto the pile...

You get the picture. Things like this, of course, would depend entirely on those aspects of your character that you've decided make up his personality. Some warriors *would* just wade in, sword swinging. Some wizards might do the same. It all depends on the character and what he's hoping to accomplish, but it doesn't have to be a simple (and boring) matter of "I swing. I hit."

Remember, no one wants to play a boring game where nothing happens, but it's not all the GM's responsibility to keep things moving. By coming up with a good character conception with a fully-realized personality, and then by playing that personality to the best of your abilities, you add more drama and excitement to the game than if you were to just rely on stats and stereotype to tell you what to do.

Chapter 4

Sample Characters
What Works and Why?

Here, for your amusement (and possibly education) are some sample characters. Some were created by your Uncle Figgy, some by players in his games. Some worked and some didn't. In keeping with the tradition of being non-system specific, all game stats and attributes have been removed, leaving just the basic idea and personality of the characters. The names of all have been changed to protect me from the wrath of the guilty. Enjoy!

Character: Luanne Schaumberg
Genre: Supers

This was a decent character concept for a Supers game -- a liquid-metal robot that had somehow convinced itself that it was a normal (albeit super-powered) human. The problem wasn't in the character concept itself, but in the playing. When selecting minor character traits, the player settled on ideas that did nothing to further the actual concept. Things like, "the character thinks she's better at sculpting than she really is" or "thinks she's a good liar" and even "she doesn't understand the concept of having pets". HUH!? Wouldn't something like "she always carries around a picture of a family that came with her wallet, claiming that it's her own family" have been just a little bit closer to home? How about "she thinks June Cleaver is her mother"?

As far as play goes, the player was an Average Joe at best -- the character's personality was the same as the player's and no extraordinary effort was put into roleplaying.

Character: Lucinda
Genre: Fantasy

A rather common stereotype for a Fantasy game, Lucinda was nothing more than a sorcerer. Although she could have been just another robe-wearing, fireball-tossing magician, the player took her above and beyond -- stretching the stereotype to the breaking point. First was her physical description: 4 feet tall and 90 pounds. Then came her personality; she constantly mothered everyone else in the group, even if it meant being brutally honest with them ("yes, dear, you *do* look impressive with that sword, but I think that knight will slice you to ribbons") and brutally honest she was. The game system offered quite a bit in the line of magical spells, but Lucinda's player opted away from the traditional power-blast sorceries and instead settled on a selection of bizarre spells that were more suited to her motherly personality.

In play, Lucinda's player was an Average Joe who was well on her way to being a Mad Gamer. She never missed the opportunity to mother the other characters, and those opportunities came up a lot. Although she didn't go over the top with her roleplaying, she stayed in character throughout the games and Lucinda's personality wasn't quite the same as the player's own.

Character: Wink
Genre: Fantasy

Another stereotype for a Fantasy game, Wink was a thief. And he didn't go beyond it, either. Quite frankly, Wink was so stereotypical, he was incredibly boring. His character traits were a tendency toward overconfidence and acting without thinking, as well as (surprise, surprise) being a kleptomaniac. And that was the extent of it.

The player was unable to rise above the boring nature of his character, even though he tried playing it with an accent and a small bit of acting. It takes an excellent actor to work well with a cardboard-cutout for a character, and Wink's player was definitely not going to be up for any Oscars...

Character: Dominator
Genre: Supers

Another decent (and already-used) concept for a Supers game: Dominator had once been a police sergeant who had discovered too much and so had been silenced. Instead of letting good raw materials go to waste, his killers removed his brain and spinal cord and placed them inside an ultra-powerful robotic body -- the computer's program can't override the cop's human mind, so he rebels and a new force for justice is loosed upon the world. The player did well in adding personal touches to the concept, such as an obsession to find others like him ("if they did it to me, they have to have done it to others") and a sense of discomfort around people he considered to be "alive". The crowning glory was a very sad touch: he always carried around his old badge to remind him of the person he'd once been.

The concept was decent, the personality was good, and the player didn't let a good thing go to waste -- Dominator was played with a tragic air that the player carried off quite well indeed. Even the other players felt sorry for him.

Character: Steven Lynch
Genre: Pulp Horror

If Wink (see above) was an example of what a mediocre roleplayer could do with a boring character, Steven Lynch is an example of what an excellent roleplayer can do with one just as boring.

he hard-boiled Private Eye, what a stereotype for the pulps! And the player didn't take it beyond that. The character had a penchant for cigars, fedoras and his pistol (though not necessarily in that order). Everything else about him seemed to come right out of the pages of a 1920's dime-novel.

Despite the apparently boring nature of the character, the player went so far over the top with his roleplaying that he was able to carry it off to good effect. His enthusiasm and energy for the game resulted in some very memorable scenes. A Mad Gamer of the highest degree, the player used props, spoke with an accent, and was responsible for moving the game along when a mediocre plot and poor GameMastering could not.